

Fat Chance

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Like most 16-year-olds, Abbey wants to wear the latest fashions. She meets her friends most Saturdays and they spend hours browsing High Street shops.

Abbey loves the clothes but she usually leaves empty-handed. Her problem is that she can't fit into them.

As the UK faces an epidemic of obesity, Abbey is one of millions. Unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles mean that 70 per cent of men and 63 per cent of women are overweight.

There are handfuls of statistics to gorge on. Nearly a quarter of adults and one in six children are obese, meaning that they are more seriously overweight. The level of obesity has trebled since the 1980s.

By 2010 more than 14 million people in the UK – about a quarter of the population – are forecast to be obese. If the trends of the past 10 years continue, more than half of the country's children may be obese by 2020.



HAPPY CAMPERS: Preparing for a walk up Skiddaw are, from left, Ali Evans, 16, George Quaile, 14, Abbey Toon, 16, and Krissy Wright, 15, who have all been at the weight-loss camp at Newton Rigg, near Penrith.

The links between obesity and ill health have been well researched. The World Health Organisation estimates that around 58 per cent of type 2 diabetes, 21 per cent of heart disease and up to 42 per cent of certain cancers are attributable to excess body fat. This week the British Fertility Society recommended that very obese women should not be allowed fertility treatment.

Obesity already causes about 9,000 premature deaths a year in the UK, costing the NHS £1 billion. The Department of Health has now instructed every primary care trust (PCT) to develop a strategy to prevent and treat obesity, with specific targets to reduce it in children.

Mike Graham is North Cumbria PCT's public health development specialist. He says that the increase in obesity is due mainly to lack of exercise. "Most of us have cars. We don't even walk to the bus stop. Large numbers of us have office-bound jobs. A lot of us work from home. There has been an increase in the numbers of people going to gyms and leisure centres but that hasn't been enough to offset the day to day stuff.

"Changes in eating patterns are also a major factor. Whereas we used to eat three meals a day, many people now snack through the day and have a large meal late in the evening. We also rely more on processed convenience foods which are high in fat and sugar. There's not as much fruit and vegetables and roughage.

"In recent years there has also been a substantial increase in eating out. Food eaten out tends to be higher in calories and is often accompanied by alcohol. The rise in alcohol consumption across all social groups is a major factor. A pint of beer or lager contains around 200 calories but has little nutritional value."

In an attempt to offset the damage done by our diet, the government's chief medical officer recommends that children and young people should have a total of at least 60 minutes' physical activity every day. Adults should aim for at least 30 minutes five or more days a week. In north Cumbria only 16 per cent of people meet these minimum levels.

"The best way is to make a series of small changes," says Mike Graham. "The first week you could have a piece of fruit each day with your lunch instead of a packet of crisps. After a week that will have become a habit, so you can do something else, like getting off the bus a stop earlier and walking a bit further."

For some people, like Abbey, more radical action feels like the only option. Abbey is from Newcastle but she has spent the past eight weeks in Cumbria, at the county's first fat camp – officially known as a summer weight-loss camp.



GOOD START: Course leaders and participants enjoy breakfast

This is run by an American company called Wellspring. Its first UK camp opened in July at the University of Central Lancashire's Newton Rigg campus near Penrith.

It ends tomorrow. Twenty-four overweight youngsters, aged 12 to 17, have spent between four and eight weeks there. Wellspring offers behavioural therapy, healthy eating and adventure activities such as rock climbing, abseiling and canoeing.

The company claims an average four pounds per week weight loss for each child at one of its camps, and that last year 80 per cent of people maintained this loss.

Super-sized teenagers have come to Penrith from around the world and across the UK to change the habits of a lunchtime. They write down everything they eat, noting its calories and fat content, and wearing pedometers to measure their movement. The camp aims to find the key to each child's issues through four weekly therapy sessions. Wellspring encourages parents to take the company's philosophy on exercise and diet back to the family home.

Abbey is a pretty, bubbly young woman but there's no doubt that she is overweight. "I've wanted to lose weight since I was about 10," she says. "My mam's been keen on me losing weight since I was six. My mam and dad separated. I used to go to my mam's to eat then to my dad's and eat again. I used to snack on chocolate all the time. I went to Weight Watchers but I never stuck at it. I just liked chocolate too much. When I got upset I used to eat. Here they encourage you to do other things, like listen to music or talk to friends.

"I'd quite like a figure like Cameron Diaz but I don't think I'll ever be like that. I don't want to be anorexic. I just want to be a size 12 or 14. I don't really get bad feelings. I'm not an unhappy person. I just want to fit into nice clothes. Going into Top Shop, I've not been able to fit in their clothes before. When I went in with my friends I'd always buy a handbag because I didn't want to draw attention to the fact that I couldn't have bought any of the clothes."



LOST IN CUMBRIA: Youngsters staying at the weight-loss camp.

Abbey is the only student to have spent eight weeks at the camp, during which time she has lost three stones. "All my clothes are a bit bigger. But I can't tell yet that I've lost weight. I want to lose another four stone. Two weeks ago my mam came, and my little brother and my gran and my auntie Maggie. They couldn't believe it. They wouldn't stop going on about it – I had to tell them to shut up. It did make me feel good. I was worried that I'd go back home and no one would notice."

Krissy Wright from Warrington will go back to school next week 25 pounds lighter than she was at the end of last term. The 15-year-old had been trying to lose weight since she was 11 but didn't have the willpower. "I had no energy to do anything. I just ate out of boredom and I never wanted to do any exercise. I thought I was too unhealthy to exercise. I'd get the bus to school or my dad would give me a lift. It was only 10 minutes so I could have walked it."

Before her first lesson Krissy would have a bacon or sausage sandwich from the school canteen and

chips with lunch every day. After school she would snack on crisps then eat a big dinner, with lots of chips or rice. Burger King and KFC were among her favourite places.

"I tried to tell myself it was OK. I'd get upset because I was bigger than most of my friends. I knew I had to lose weight but I couldn't. I've got more confidence now because I've done something I thought I couldn't do."



BYE GEORGE: George Quaile, 14, has lost 19 pounds in four weeks

Fourteen-year-old George Quaile from Surrey has wanted to lose weight for two years. "I needed a kick start. I've lost 18 or 19 pounds in four weeks and I want to lose another two stones. I lost 11 pounds in the first week, probably because I was eating smaller portions. At boarding school I exercise a lot but the food is quite bad and my portions were too big. I would have a fry-up or a croissant every morning and there were always potatoes and chips. After sport I would have a chocolate bar.

"I didn't know much about nutrition. I used to eat eggs a lot but an egg contains 11.8 grams of fat and I should have only 12 grams a day. I think about what to eat and what not to eat now. Next term I'll cook at home.

"Sometimes I have some quite down days. I try to forget about it and move on. I've got a lot fitter. I can run two miles without stopping. It just feels better."

Jane Morrison, Wellspring UK's programme supervisor, has noticed that many more young people are overweight than during her childhood. "It's a changing environment. Fast food is more readily available, and marketed at the younger generation. There seems to have been a change somewhere along the line where kids are less likely to play in the street.

"One of the reasons we're an adventure camp is to show that anyone and everyone can push themselves. The children have spent the past few weeks looking at Blencathra from the camp and now they've asked if they can climb it. They climbed Skiddaw after they'd been camping for three days. The energy that produced was amazing. When parents have visited they've made comments like 'They're more confident', and 'They look me in the eye'."

The camp seems to have the recipe for success, but at a price. A four-week stay costs £2,900. Six weeks cost £4,300 and eight weeks £5,200.

What about those who want to lose pounds from their waist rather than their wallet?

North Cumbria Primary Care Trust is working with local councils on strategies to promote exercise, and with leisure centres to develop exercise schemes for people who may feel awkward attending gyms. The Trust, with Cumbria County Council, has employed a cycling co-ordinator to train volunteer cycle leaders who will organise rides and support people who want to take up cycling but lack confidence on the roads.

In west Cumbria community nurses are setting up weight reduction classes that can be accessed via a referral from a GP.

All schoolchildren between four and 10 will have their Body Mass Index – an indicator of whether people are overweight – measured. The Trust is working with schools to promote balanced eating and physical activity.

Alan Rutter, head of Robert Ferguson Primary school in Carlisle, has been a teacher for 33 years. Like most schools, Robert Ferguson has made its canteen meals more healthy and encouraged pupils to snack on fruit instead of sweets and crisps. But Mr Rutter feels says schools and other organisations can only do so much.

"A very large proportion of children have packed lunches. The onus is on parents to make sure those are healthy. Children don't get as much exercise as they did. Parents are more concerned

about letting their children run free. It's up to parents to encourage children to do more than watch TV and play with PlayStations."

The number of hours spent doing PE at school has also fallen in recent years. "Because of the pressures on schools from Ofsted to get good Sats results there has been a move away from things that aren't academic," says Alan Rutter. "Schools have only a finite number of hours in a week."

Sport Cumbria is part of a national structure, overseen by Sport England, to encourage young people to be more physically active. It helps to organise the annual Cumbria Youth Games, which this year saw 900 young people from all over the county competing in Whitehaven.

Vanessa Foster is the organisation's sport and physical education development officer. She says: "The vision we have is everybody in Cumbria enjoying sport and physical activity as part of their everyday lives.

"I think we need to tread a very fine line. There's been a lot in the news about children with anorexia. It's not about being thin. It's about being a healthy weight. That doesn't mean they have to look like a supermodel.

"We're looking at a healthy lifestyle, not just going to the gym or doing lengths and lengths of a swimming pool. The idea is to incorporate healthy activity into your everyday life, such as walking to school. When I go to schools I often struggle to get parked because of all the parents dropping off their children."

Jacqui Ross has been a dietician at the Cumberland Infirmary for 18 years. She says: "The thing that's becoming obvious is the incidence of diabetes and heart disease increasing.

"Weight loss just creeps up on you. Most of us put on weight, even if it's just a couple of pounds a year. The best advice is to eat regular meals; breakfast, lunch and an evening meal. Eat well and watch portion sizes. Even the size of your dinner plate makes a difference. Keep on the move. We're not saying run a marathon but use the stairs a bit more.

"A lot of people have emotional or psychological problems. That's why they need a bit more help. We don't issue diet sheets. We talk to them about why they eat what they do. You can do it. Set tiny goals and keep at it."