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CONTENTS

	SPORTS AND BIOMEDICAL	9
B. Ilinova	BODY COMPOSITION AND SOMATOTYPE OF ERASMUS STUDENTS	11
S. Tzvetkov	APPLICABILITY OF RELATIVE OXYGEN CONSUMPTION FOR EVALUATION OF FUNCTIONAL WORK CAPACITY IN ADOLESCENT ATHLETES	17
D. Zaykova, M. Konchev, I. Yanev, L. Dimitrova	EPIDEMIOLOGY PROFILE OF INJURIES OF ELITE AND SUB-ELITE MALE ARTISTIC GYMNASTS IN SOFIA, BULGARIA	23
E. Miloshova	SPORTS INJURIES – A SURVEY AMONG YOUNG BULGARIAN ATHLETES	31
D. Dimitrova, E. Miloshova	RISK FACTORS FOR STRESS FRACTURES IN MALE ATHLETES	38
T. Pedev, L. Mladenov, A. Gochkov, S. Shandurkova	OXYGEN SATURATION AND HEART RATE VARIABILITY DURING ORIENTEERING RACES	45
R. Iossifov, M. Kachaunov	OXYGEN CONSUMPTION IN SHORT-, MIDDLE- AND LONG-DISTANCE YOUNG SWIMMERS	51
M. Zaharinova, N. Zaekov, K. Rankov, M. Nikolova	ASSOCIATION BETWEEN CHRONOTYPE, STRESS, AND GENDER IN BULGARIAN SPORTS STUDENTS	58
M. Gateva	PROTOCOL OF HEART RATE AND BLOOD LACTATE MONITORING IN RHYTHMIC GYMNASTICS	63
H. Hristov	BIOMECHANICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FIGHT BY FRONTAL HEAD PRESSURE ON THE CHEST OF THE OPPONENT IN SUMO	68
N. Dimitrova, A. Nikolova, H. Pavlov	BIOMECHANICAL EVALUATION OF MOTOR ACTIONS AT THE GRIP "SHOULDER THROW" IN THE SPORT OF WRESTLING	73
N. Gospodarski	BIOMECHANICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BULGARIAN ELITE ROWERS' TECHNIQUE	78
D. Zagorsky	IMPORTANCE OF THE KINEMATIC CHARACTERISTICS OF MAE GERI FIGHTING TECHNIQUE FOR SPORT-RELATED INJURIES IN BULGARIAN KARATE SHOTOKAN ATHLETES	84
I. Yanev, E. Stoimenov	KINEMATIC ANALYSIS OF BACKWARD UPRISE AND 5/4 SALTO FWD STRADDLED TO HANG ON PARALLEL BARS	92
I. Ivanov, L. Trenev, Z. Stefanov, G. Rusimova, D. Zagorski, I. Janakiev, O.Tishinov, D. Trenev, A. Antonov	BIOMECHANICAL JUMP CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN (9 - 12 YEARS) BASEBALL PLAYERS AFTER STRETCHING PROGRAM	97
V. Georgieva	INFLUENCE OF A BALANCED DIET ON MUSCLE MASS IN MEN	106
P. Milanova	STUDY ON THE EFFECT OF SWAMI DEV MURTI'S YOGA PRACTICE "CROCODILE EXERCISES"	110
B. Dimitrova, G. Dincheva	NATURAL HERITAGE AND HEALING PRACTICES FOR WELLNESS LIFESTYLE	115
P. Yankov, D. Todorov, S. Simeonov	CHARACTERISTICS OF INCIDENTS AND INJURIES IN SKI AREA BOROVETS DURING THE 2019/2020 SEASON	122
V. Kotev, B. Yankov	ANALYSIS OF THE DIFFERENCES IN THE SPEED, ACCELERATION, AND POWER OF VOLLEYBALL PLAYERS ON DIFFERENT PLAYING SURFACES	128

K. Petkov, B. Tahboub	METHODOLOGY OF BACK PAIN RELIEF USING ISOMETRIC-TENSION POST-COVID-19 DISEASE	133	
L. Chervencova, Z. Zsheliaskova- Kovnova	BENEFICIAL INFLUENCE OF PANEURHYTHMY ON THE AFFECTIVE BALANCE AND HAPPINESS		
M. Angelcheva, D. Pachova	A BULGARIAN STUDY ON PATIENTS' AND DOCTORS' SATISFACTION WITH THE HOMEOPATHIC METHOD OF TREATMENT		
A. Lyuga, D. Tomov, D. Tomova	AMATEUR TENNIS PLAYER PROFILE FROM SOUTH-WEST BULGARIA AND NORTHERN GREECE	154	
V. Aleksandrova	ADAPTED FOOTBALL PROGRAM TO DEVELOP THE MOTOR SKILLS OF CHILDREN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES	161	
S. Djobova, I. Kirilova	EMPOWERMENT OF PERSONS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES THROUGH INVOLVEMENT IN SPECIAL OLYMPICS BULGARIA	168	
I. Kirilova, S. Djobova, Y. Dochevska, V. Aleksandrova, I. Zdravkov	EXTENT OF INCLUSION IN ERASMUS+ SPORT PROJECTS	174	
	PHYSICAL EDUCATION	181	
Y. Rumenov	STUDENTS' ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FOR THE COMPONENT EVALUATION FROM OTHER PARTICIPATIONS	183	
D. Nancheva, K. Naydenova	CHANGES IN THE MANIFESTATION OF THE MOTOR ABILITY SPEED IN BOYS AT THE LOWER SECONDARY STAGE OF PRIMARY EDUCATION	189	
B. Tzolov, A. Haralampieva, A. Gencheva- Vasileva	POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION AT NATIONAL SPORTS ACADEMY "VASSIL LEVSKI"– RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS	195	
M. Boncheva	CHANGES IN THE LEVEL AND TYPE OF STUDENTS' PHYSICAL ACTIVITY BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC	201	
S. Masurska, I. Vladova	TEACHERS' BEHAVIOR AND STUDENTS' DISCIPLINE	207	
E. Bellova, E. Mileva	PHYSICAL EDUCATION ONLINE TEACHING MODEL IN SCHOOL EDUCATION SETTINGS	214	
F. Muca	A GLANCE OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER'S SATISFACTION WITH THEIR PROFESSION IN ALBANIA	219	
D. Todorov, S. Simeonov, P. Iankov	THE BENEFITS OF THE COURSES IN SNOW SPORTS FOR THE STUDENTS OF THE NATIONAL SPORTS ACADEMY "VASSIL LEVSKI"	224	
N. Kostova	SOME ASPECTS OF IN-PERSON AND ONLINE PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORT	229	
G. Brestnichki, M. Borukova	SUCCESS RATE OF NSA STUDENTS IN THE ATTENDANCE AND ONLINE BASKETBALL EXAMS	236	
T. Hristakieva	TRANSLATION COMPETENCE IN THE SPECIALIZED LANGUAGE COURSES FOR SPORTS STUDENTS	244	
E. Mileva, V. Chernev	ATTITUDE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN BULGARIA TO ACADEMIC DISHONESTY BEHAVIOR	249	
Z. Zsheliaskova- Koynova, T. Hristakiava	KINESITHERAPY STUDENTS' SATISFACTION WITH ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC	255	
D. Zheleva-Terzieva	THE FORMATIVE ROLE OF ACTIVE SPORTS ACTIVITY FOR THE MORAL STATUS OF ADOLESCENTS	260	
I. Bonova, E. Mileva1, S. Kolimechkov	MORPHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND HEALTH STATUS OF 8-19-YEAR OLD GIRLS	265	

P. Petkova, O. Hristov, P. Peev, B. Petrova, M. Zdravcheva, H. Andonov	PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND DEVELOPMENT OF BULGARIAN STUDENTS	272	
V. Aleksandrova			
Ts. Traykova	STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MOTOR ABILITIES OF PRESCHOOL BOYS	279	
K. Naydenova, D. Nancheva	Naydenova,DYNAMICS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF MOTORNanchevaQUALITY SPEED IN 12 - 15-YEAR-OLD GIRLS		
D. Simeonova, A. Shalev IMPACT OF DISTANCE LEARNING IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT ON PHYSICAL PERFORMANCE IN HIGH SCHOOL BOYS			
L. Borisov	INTERDISCIPLINARY TRAINING METHODOLOGY IMPACT ON MOTOR QUALITIES OF SCHOOL BOYS	298	
B. Zlatev, H. Andonov, S. Andonov	TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF GENERAL PHYSICAL TRAINING IN 14-16 YEARS OLD STUDENTS	303	
P. Mavrudiev	MOBILE GAMES AS A MEANS OF DEVELOPING MOTOR QUALITIES IN TENNIS TRAINING	310	
T. Marinov	STRUCTURAL SPECIFICS OF THE PHYSICAL ABILITY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS	318	
S. Gruev	EFFICIENCY OF SPORTS GAMES TRAINING For 12 and 13-year old students	324	
I. Radkova, K. Naydenova	LONGITUDINALLY RESEARCH ON THE PHYSICAL FITNESS OF 10-14 YEARS OLD FEMALE PUPILS	330	
	SPORTS MANAGEMENT	337	
D. Dasheva, H. Andonov, M. Konchev, A. Boeva, H. Hristov	FINANCING OF ELITE BULGARIAN SPORT	339	
R. Solinas	KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS OF MIGRANT SPORTS PROFESSIONALS IN BULGARIA	346	
N. Stoyanova	NEW MANAGEMENT APPROACHES TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF SWIMMING RESULTS AND SPORT	352	
I. Zdravkov, Y. Dochevska	THE MAIN RISKS AND THREATS RELATED TO THE ORGANIZATION AND CONDUCT OF SPORTING EVENTS	359	
I. Slavchev	REQUIREMENTS FOR PERSONAL QUALITIES AND PROFESSIONAL SKILLS OF SPORTS OFFICIALS IN BULGARIA AND EUROPE	366	
D. Ilieva	IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL YOUTH POLICIES BY MEANS OF A PROGRAM-PROJECT APPROACH	373	
M. Pirina	NEW TREND IN COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK FOR SPORTS MANAGERS	378	
V. Dimitrov	AUTONOMY AND RESPONSIBILITY OF MODERN SPORT: BETWEEN NATIONAL STANDARDS, THE APPLICABILITY OF EUROPEAN UNION LAW AND MARKET MECHANISMS	382	
I. Sandanski	PARENTS AS VALUE CO-CREATORS AND DESTROYERS I N YOUTH FOOTBALL IN BULGARIA	388	
N. Atanasova, G. Draganov	VOLUNTARY WORK IN THE MANAGEMENT OF SPORTS EVENTS	395	
A. Dimitrova	CURRENT SOCIOLOGICAL PROBLEMS RELATED TO TENNIS IN THE SYSTEM OF BULGARIAN SCHOOL EDUCATION	402	
G. Draganov, I. Sandanski, I. Slavchev	STUDY OF VIOLENCE AMONG BASKETBALL FANS IN BULGARIA	409	
D. Dimov, E. Atanasov	THE ROLE OF SET PIECES IN MODERN SOCCER	417	

	DIDACTIC TEST FOR ASSESSMENT OF	
S. Ilieva-Sinigerova	THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE	423
	IN TAEKWON-DO	
A. Shopoy,	EXPERIMENTAL METHODOLOGY FOR EVALUATION OF THE	100
T. Todorov	PRELIMINARY TRAINING OF MOUNTAIN GUIDES	429
E.Vitanova	THE OLYMPIC FLAME THROUGH BULGARIA – 1936	436
	PHYSIOTHERAPY	443
		115
N Dopov	$\begin{array}{c} \text{ASSESSIVENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS} \\ \text{OF LUMPAD SDINAL MANIDULATION IN DATIENTS WITH} \end{array}$	115
м. гороч	MECHANICAL LOW BACK DAIN	443
T. Causana Danaharra	PREDISPOSING FACTORS AND PREVENTION FOR	450
1. Grueva-Pancheva	OVERUSE INJURIES IN AINCLE AND FOUT COMPLEX IN	450
S. Naydenova,	COMBINED METHODS OF PHYSIOTHERAPY	456
E. Dimitrova	IN CASE OF CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME	
N. Gencheva	PHYSIOTHERAPY FOR COLON CANCER IN THE EARLY	463
	POSTOPERATIVE PERIOD – A CASE REPORT	
	COMPLEX RECOVERY OF THE UPPER LIMB	
N. Popova	AFTER NERVE TRANSFERS IN PATIENTS WITH ADULT	469
	BRACHIAL PLEXUS INJURIES	
I Sazdova	ASPECTS OF PHYSIOTHERAPY AFTER NONOPERATIVE	474
	TREATMENT OF LATERAL ANKLE SPRAIN	1/1
D. Popova,	SCAPULOTHORACIC DYSKINESIA -	
M. Filipova,	ETIOLOGY, FUNCTIONAL STUDY AND GUIDELINES	480
D. Kantchev	FOR PHYSIOTHERAPY	
E. Dimitrova,	COMPARISON OF TWO PHYSIOTHERAPY METHODS IN	105
F. Daci	PATIENTS WITH SHOULDER IMPINGEMENT	485
F. Daci,	FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT ON THE PATIENTS WITH	400
E. Dimitrova	SHOULDER IMPINGEMENT	490
P. Mincheva-	FITBALL EXERCISES AS A MEANS OF TRAINING	
Bolgurova	AND PREVENTION OF POSTURAL CONTROL	494
S. Shandurkova,	IMPROVING AEROBIC CAPACITY AND SPINE FLEXIBILITY	
M. Stoychevski,	THROUGH ADAPTED SWIMMING EXERCISES FOR PUPILS	499
5. Belomazneva- Dimitrova	IN PRIMARY SCHOOL	
	TRADITIONAL CHINESE MASSAGE (TUINA)	
D. Marinova	FOR CHRONIC NECK PAIN	506
	A SSESSMENT OF BODY POSTURE OF	
D. Sadikova	6-7 YEARS OLD CHILDREN IN RELATION TO THE BMI	511
	A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE FEFECT	
D. Stefanova,	OF FXTRACORPORFAL SHOCK WAVE THERAPY	
M. Angelcheva,	AND INTERFERENTIAL ELECTROTHERAPY	515
S. Bogdanova	IN PERIARTHRITIS HUMEROSCAPULARIS	
R Tasheva	IN THE FUNCTIONAL DIAGNOSIS	522
IC. Iushevu	OF CHILDREN SPORTING FOOTBALL	522
	THE LISE OF SPECIALIZED KINESITHER A DV IN PATIENTS	
M. Filipova, D. Popova	WITH ISCHEMIC STROKE WHO ARE TREATED WITH TISSUE	528
Ch. Stoychev	PI A SMINOGEN ACTIVATOR	520
v. Dimitrova, L. Sazdova	FOR CHRONIC NON-SPECIFIC I OW RACK DAIN	532
	COMDIEV CREECH THER ADV AND VINECITIER ADELTIC	
M. Simonska, M. Filipova	Ουνίγισελ στέξυπ ι πεκλγί ΑΝΟ κινεσιτπεκλγέυτις Δεςεςεμενή ινι δεδεωνίς ωπτυ λοοιπδεώ	520
A. Andreeva	NEUROLOGICAL DISEASES	338
	MECKOLOGICAL DISLASES	

S. Ivanova, F. Alexiev	POSSIBILITIES OF EEG DIAGNOSTICS FOR EVALUATION OF THE MASSAGE EFFECTS	543
Y. Georgiev, N. Gencheva, T. Marinov	RESEARCH OF HAMSTRINGS MUSCLES IN CHILDREN SPORTS KARATE	549
M. Ilcheva	THE EFFECT OF A SPECIALIZED PHYSIOTHERAPY PROGRAM IN AN INFANT WITH A RARE GENETIC DISEASE	555
B. Jorgić, S. Kostić, S. Đorđević, M. Hadžović, V. Antić	EFFECTS OF EXERCISE PROGRAMS ON THE CERVICAL SYNDROME: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW	560
D. Popova-Dobreva	PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND PREVALENCE OF DYSMENORRHEA AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN BULGARIA	567

MORPHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND HEALTH STATUS OF 8-19-YEAR OLD GIRLS

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ABSTRACT

Factors influencing health and well-being of children and adolescents are related to their morphological characteristics and health status. Anthropometric and morphological parameters correlate with children's health, well-being, physical activity, and self-esteem. Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyze the factors with the most significant impact on the body composition and health status and to evaluate overweight and obesity levels of girls and adolescents between the ages of 8 and 19 by using WHO references. This study included 202 girls with a mean age of 12.1 ± 3.5 years, mean height of 150.1 ± 15.0 cm, and mean BMI of 18.8 ± 4.0 kg/m². All of the participants were assessed by using the InBody120 body composition analyzer. Principal component factor analysis, using body height as a selection variable, was used in order to determine the main factors related to health status of children and adolescents. The factor analysis identified three main factors: (1) anthropometric parameters of obesity; (2) morphological characteristics; (3) age and metabolism. In conclusion, the anthropometric parameters of obesity had the most significant impact on the analyses of the body composition and health status in children and adolescents.

Keywords: anthropometry, adolescents, health status, height, factor analysis

INTRODUCTION

Changes in lifestyle, associated with constant use of digital technologies in all areas of social activity and communication, have had a significant impact on the health-related physical fitness of children and adolescents. The wide-spread of online learning influenced by Covid-19 lockdowns was a main factor for reducing physical activity of school children with little or no Physical Education and sports classes, and at the same time increasing their screen time and sedentary behavior. This has been well-documented by a number of authors who outlined the negative impact of the pandemic on children's physical activity (Galle et al., 2020; Gobbi et al., 2020; Lopez-Gil et al., 2021; Bronikowska et al., 2021; Daniel, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020), in addition to the fact that most children and adolescents did not reach the recommended by the WHO physical activity guidelines of 60 min of physical activity per day even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Konstabel et al., 2014). Physical activity during youth is essential for adolescent's health and wellbeing, and therefore its reduction could have harmful effects in later life (Scheerder et al., 2006). One of the most common effects which have been reported in relation to reduced physical activity in children and adolescents include negative changes in body composition, increased obesity levels, depression, social isolation, decline in metabolic and immunological functions, and others (Jakobsson et al.,

results indicated that the physical activity patterns of children are significantly related to their physical fitness (Tremblay et al., 2016). Therefore, health-related studies on morphological and anthropometrical parameters in children and adolescents are of a significant interest in the current pandemic and post-pandemic conditions.

The assessment and evaluation of body composition in children and adolescents are mainly undertaken for two reasons: to observe the relationship between anthropometric and morphological parameters in relation to physical fitness and in relation to health and wellbeing (Kilani & Abu-Eisheh, 2010; Bjelica et al., 2021). Overweight children and adolescents with low physical activity levels tend to transfer these negative outcomes in later life (Dietz et al., 2007), and it has been reported that fat accumulation during childhood contributes to becoming overweight in adulthood (Gültekin, Dasgupta & Özer, 2014). For those reasons, it has been recommended to monitor and evaluate body composition at young ages (Espana-Romero et al., 2010; Ruiz et al., 2010; Ortega et al., 2015; Cvejic, Pejovic & Ostojic, 2013; Seefeldt & Vogel, 1989).

and adolescents include negative changes in body composition, increased obesity levels, depression, social isolation, decline in metabolic and immunological functions, and others (Jakobsson et al., 2020; Hwang et al.; Stockwell et al., 2021). Reported weight divided by height in meters squared, and it has been widely applied to classify children's weight as underweight, normal, overweight or obese (WHO, 2000; Flegal, Tabak & Ogden, 2006; Pekar, 2011; Keys et al., 2014). However, the BMI does not distinguish between fat and muscle tissues (Chatterjee, Bajpai & Gerdes, 2021; Bogin & Varela-Silva, 2012). Another limitation of the BMI is that its value varies significantly at young ages (Cole, Freeman & Preece, 1995; Cole, Bellizzi, Flegal & Dietz, 2000; Holford & Colson, 2008), and the criteria used to evaluate children's BMI are different from that for adults. The value of children's BMI is compared against reference charts for the same age and gender, and then transformed into a percentile or Z-score (Flegal, Tabak & Ogden, 2006). One of the most popular international BMI reference charts for children and adolescents are those produced by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2007).

The utilization of adequate statistical methods can provide further clarity on the importance of growth parameters, such as body weight and height, and their relationship with the health and physical activity levels of children and adolescents. Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyze the main factors which have the most significant impact on the body composition and health status, as well as to evaluate overweight and obesity levels of girls and adolescents between the ages of 8 and 19 by using WHO references.

METHODS

This study consisted of 202 girls and adolescents from 8 to 19 years of age (mean age of 12.1 ± 3.5 years) from different schools in Sofia, Bulgaria. The sample of students was obtained according to the needs of the study and the accessibility of the participants. All participants were engaged in similar levels of physical activity and PE lessons.

An informed consent form was obtained from the parents of the participants prior to the study intervention, and the study was undertaken in accordance with the ethical standards established in the Declaration of Helsinki for Human Research (WMA, 2013).

Body height was measured to the nearest 0.1 cm by using SECA height measure. A standardized protocol for analyses with the InBody120 body com-

position analyzer was used for all participants. The portable analyzer uses a direct segmental multi-frequency bioelectrical impedance analysis method (DSM-BIA) with two different frequencies (20 kHz, 100kHz) at a total of five body segments (right arm, left arm, trunk, right leg, and left leg).

The following parameters were recorded: Body Mass Index (BMI), weight, body fat mass (BFM), present body fat (PBF), waist-to-hip ratio (WHR), growth score, obesity degree (normal range between 90-110), protein, minerals, fat free mass (FFM), skeletal muscle mass (SMM), total body water (TBW), and basal metabolic ratio (BMR).

Participants were measured in the morning on an empty stomach, bear feet, wearing shorts and T-shirts. All of the measurements and assessments were conducted in the sports lab at the Center for Scientific and Applied Activity in Sports, National Sports Academy, Bulgaria.

The statistical analyses were conducted by using SPSS 20.0, IBM, USA software. The analyses were based on the total of 202 participants by using descriptive statistics and principal component factor analysis with rotated component matrix (Varimax with Kaiser Normalization). Body height was chosen as the selection variable to determine the factors related to morphological characteristics and health status of children and adolescents.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The recorded parameters of all participants in this study are presented in Table 1. The coefficient of variation was very good ($CV \le 10$) for the parameter height and WHR; good (CV 10-20) for growth score and obesity degree, and acceptable for (CV 20-30) age, BMI and BMR. The mean BMI of the 8-19-year-old girls was $18.8 \pm 4.0 \text{ kg/m}^2$, which was within the 'normal' weight category (18.5–24.9 kg/ m²) defined by the WHO (WHO, 2000). The BMI Z-scores were calculated based on the WHO references for children and adolescents between the ages of 5 and 19 years of age, where normal Z-score is defined between -2SD and 1SD, overweight is >1SD and <2SD, obesity >2SD, and thinness > -2SD (WHO, 2007). The individual BMI Z-scores of the children in our study showed that 73.8% of the girls were within the 'normal category', 3.5% were assessed as 'thin', 17.3% were 'overweight', and 5.4% were 'obese'.

Parameters	Mean ± SD	Coefficient of Variation
Age [years]	12.1 ± 3.5	28.9
Height [cm]	$\textbf{150.1} \pm 15.0$	10.0
Weight [kg]	$\textbf{42.5} \pm 15.0$	35.4
BMI [kg/m2]	$\textbf{18.8} \pm 4.0$	21.0
Total Body Water [L]	$\textbf{24.1} \pm 7.9$	32.7
Protein [kg]	$\textbf{10.3} \pm 9.5$	92.2
Minerals [kg]	8.3 ± 13.4	160.6
Body Fat Mass [kg]	$\textbf{9.1}\pm5.5$	60.8
Fat Free Mass [kg]	$\textbf{25.8} \pm 13.9$	54.0
Skeletal Muscle Mass [kg]	15.3 ± 6.1	39.6
Percent Body Fat [%]	$\textbf{21.0}\pm8.2$	38.8
Basal Metabolic Ratio [kcal/24h]	$\textbf{1080.1} \pm 232.4$	21.5
Waist-to-Hip Ratio	$\textbf{0.81} \pm 0.05$	6.1
Growth Score [points]	88.9 ± 16.1	18.1
Obesity degree	95.2 ± 17.3	18.2

Table 1. Anthropometric and morphological parameters of the 8-19-year-old girls

In addition, the individual BMI Z-scores for girls between the ages of 8-11 and 12-19 were also analyzed due to the specific differences in growth and physical development in those age brackets. The results showed that 77% of the girls between 8 and 11 were assessed within the 'normal category', 13% were 'overweight', 7% were 'obese', and 3% were 'thin'. In the group of girls between the age of 12 and 19, around 80% were with 'normal' weight, 17% were 'overweight', 2.4% were 'thin', and none of them were 'obese'. The lack of any obese children in this age bracket is probably due to the higher level of physical activity reported in the older girls, in-

cluding an average of 3 training sessions a week.

The factor analysis component matrix is presented in Table 2. The analysis identified three factors which were named depending on the anthropometric, morphological, age- and metabolic-related parameters included in them (with a factor score above 0.700). The three factors derived from the correlation matrix had a total of 95.48% explained variance. The first factor accounted for 59.2%, which was the largest possible variance in the data set. The second factor accounted for 29.6% and the third for 6.6%.

Parameters	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Age	.004	078	786
BMI	.834	.220	.503
Weight	.816	.306	.488
Total Body Water (TBW)	.342	.079	.862
Protein	099	992	.062
Minerals	119	993	007
Body Fat Mass (BFM)	.891	.273	.314
Fat Free Mass (FFM)	.205	.945	.238
Skeletal Muscle Mass (SMM)	.231	.908	.321
Percent Body Fat (PBF)	.888	.312	.216
Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR)	.345	.110	.858
Waist-to-Hip Ratio (WHR)	.942	.096	.170
Growth Score	922	.146	.232
Obesity degree	.815	.308	.488

Table 2. Factor analysis of the anthropometric and morphological parameters for 8-19-year-old girls

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. The first factor was named 'anthropometric parameters of obesity', and it included the following: BMI, weight, BFM, PBF, WHR, growth score, and obesity degree index. This factor accounted for more than half of the variance of the data set. The second factor was named 'morphological characteristics' including the following recoded parameters: protein, minerals, FFM, and SMM. The third factor was named 'age and metabolism' and it included age, TBW, and BMR.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The factor analysis of the anthropometric and morphological parameters of the children and adolescents in our study identified three main components related to their health status.

The first one included mostly body composition parameters, and accounted for more than half, 56% of the variance in the data set. The parameter with the highest value (0.94) within the first factor was WHR (Table 2). The WHR represents the circumference of the waist to that of the hips, and a value above 0.85 in women is considered abdominal obesity (Andreacchi et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2021). In our study, 21 girls (around 10% of the sample) were evaluated with abdominal obesity but at the same time these subjects had a normal BMI. This is probably because of the limitation of the BMI assessment. Furthermore, studies indicated that the location and amount of fat, rather than overall adiposity, are much more informative for predicting obesity, cardiometabolic disease, and cancer (Pulit et al., 2019). Therefore, the BMI assessment should be utilized in a combination with other methods for evaluating body composition.

The parameter with the second highest value in the first factor was growth score (-0.92). In essence, the growth score includes body composition, obesity degree, height and weight, and it helps to establish the growth stage of children and adolescents (In-Body120, 2022).

Body fat mass and percent body fat were the third and fourth parameters with the highest values, respectively (Table 2). Both parameters possess a great importance for the health and wellbeing of children in the later stages of their adult life. The findings of a comprehensive review including longitudinal studies showed that a higher level of healthy body composition with less fat mass in childhood is as-

sociated with a healthier cardiovascular profile and with a lower risk of developing diseases in adulthood (Ruiz et al., 2009).

The last two parameters with a high value in the first factor from our study were BMI and weight. They are both widely used in the classifications of normal body weight. BMI was recommended as an index of underweight for screening out children who are malnourished (Lohman & Going, 2006), and low body weight in children in sport, below the age- and gender-related norms, was reported as the most significant factor in delaying the onset of puberty (Georgopoulos et al., 2004).

The second factor (morphological characteristics) accounted for 29.6% variance in the data set, and it included parameters such as minerals, protein, FFM and SMM. The parameter with the highest value in the second factor was the amount of minerals (Table 2). It was reported that minerals account for around 4% of the body weight (McArdle, Katch & Katch, 2015). The second highest parameter in the morphological characteristics factor in our study was the amount of proteins, which are essential for the body to repair cells and make new ones. The third and fourth parameters with high value were FFM and SMM. The primary component of FFM is SMM, which is the force generating tissue of the body (Malina et al., 2013). FFM have been also used in the literature to calculate fat-free mass index (FFMI, FFM/height²) and fat mass index (FMI; FM/height²) (Hattori, Tatsumi & Tanaka, 1997). Both indexes were utilized to assess body composition in diabetes adolescent girls (Chung et al., 2015). It has been reported that FFM in a combination with low PBF are used as criteria in training sessions to achieve ideal body composition related fitness (Kilani & Abu-Eisheh, 2010).

The third factor in our study was linked with age and metabolism, and it accounted for the lowest variance in the data set (around 7%). The parameters included in this factor were age, TBW and BMR, from which TBW had the highest value (Table 2). TBW content decreases with age, with newborns having the highest water content. TBW accounts for 40-60% of human body weight, and around 74% of muscle tissue and 50% of fat tissue is water Moreover, water is vital for the human body because it is involved in the metabolic and thermoregulatory processes. Furthermore, of the total body water, around 62% is intracellular and 38% is extracellular (McArdle, Katch & Katch, 2015).

For the calculation of our study BMR was determined by using the InBody120 body composition analyzer applying a regression equation based on FFM (InBody120, 2022). BMR is the minimum energy required to maintain the body's vital functions at rest, and our results showed that BMR was correlated with the other anthropometric and morphological parameter: height (r = .897); age (r =.790); BMI (r = .700); weight (r = .950); TBW (r= 1); SMM (r = .700); FFM (r = .200); WHR (r =.570); growth score (r = .380); obesity (r = .400); protein (r = .600); Minerals (r = .500); BFM (r =.500). BMR is affected by FFM, and in people with higher amount of FFM, the basal metabolic rate is much higher, which means that more kilocalories are needed for vital body functions at rest.

In our study, a total of 20% of the girls between the ages of 8 and 11 were assessed as overweight (13%) or obese (7%), and 17% of the female adolescents between 12 and 19 years of age were overweight with zero obese subjects. These findings were lower than the observed values by other researchers, which ranged from 30% to 45% of overweight/ obesity frequency in children (Guinhouya, Apete & Hubert, 2009; Sanchez-Vaznaugh, 2015). Nevertheless, 20% is still a high number (2 out of every 10 children) considering that excessive weight above the WHO norms not only limits performance but it also possesses a risk of developing diseases in adulthood.

In conclusion, the anthropometric parameter height showed a strong relation with the other parameters from the analysis of body composition. The strongest relation of height was reported with the parameters from the first factor (anthropometric parameters of obesity). The anthropometric parameters of obesity had the most significant impact on the analyses of the body composition and health status of the children and adolescents in our study.

Although the second and the third factors accounted for much less variance in the data set, they determine the structure of the human body, and they are influenced by lifestyle, diet, and exercise. Therefore, all three factors are important in building the morphological characteristics of children and adolescents. At the same time, they should be considered in the context of the overall health status and well-being of the subjects.

Our results raise the question of the dynamics and the relationship between the parameters that are most relevant to the health of children nowadays. This study provides the basis for conduct new, similar research, and comparisons of some age- and gender-related characteristics. At the same time, future cross-cultural research would be of a great interest in order to identify differences in the parameters studied in terms of certain national, social and demographic characteristics.

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