



CHILDHOOD OBESITY

Overweight children are at much greater risk for health problems now and in the future than children who are in a healthy weight range. Serious weight related conditions that were once rare in youth, like high blood pressure and Type 2 diabetes, are now being seen more frequently in children. It is important to understand that the longer a child remains overweight, the greater his or her risk for serious long-term health problems.

The best way to find out if a youth between the ages of 2 and 20 is overweight is to have a physician measure their Body Mass Index-for-age (BMI-for-age). These measurements should be a standard part of your child's routine physical examination or well child visit, and the results will determine whether a child is underweight, healthy weight, overweight or obese.

In most cases, a child should not be put on a weight loss diet. The recommended goal is to stop or slow weight gain as the child continues to grow so that their height and weight eventually achieve a healthy balance.

Ways to encourage changes to your child's eating:

- Buy, prepare and offer the foods you would like for your child to eat. Allow them to choose what, and how much of these foods they will eat.
- Keep offering healthy foods even if they are initially refused.
- Offer mostly whole grain breads and cereals, vegetables and fruits with moderate amounts of meat products and low-fat dairy foods.
- Include your child's choices in the family menu.
- Make healthy food fun by cutting fruit or vegetables into different shapes.
- Involve children in simple food preparation.
- Offer treats such as cakes, chips or "fast foods" only occasionally.
- Limit sweet drinks, including juice, soda and sports drinks, as they add unnecessary calories. Offer water instead – it is the best drink for children.
- Let your child decide when they are full to help them understand feelings of fullness and hunger. These habits help control appetite and prevent overeating as they grow.
- Encourage slower eating if your family eats quickly. Put your knife and fork down between mouthfuls. Chat during the meal.
- Help your child recognize if they eat when they are bored, sad or lonely. Suggest another activity to help distract them.
- Do not punish, reward or cheer your child up with food. Doing so may lead to a lifetime habit of using food as comfort or as a reward.

Increase everyday activity at home:

Plan and ensure your child is physically active on a daily basis. At least 60 minutes of active play is recommended. Physical activity can help to build physical, mental and social skills and increases the feeling of being healthy. Activity should be fun and satisfying without focusing only on competition, fitness or skills. As children get older, your role as a parent changes from being active with your child to supporting your child's involvement with outside activity.

- Be active together. Family-based activities should happen at least once per week.
- Encourage lots of free, outside playtime every day.
- Try to use the car less; for shorter distances walk or cycle to school or shops. Have a plan to walk increasingly further distances.
- Help your child find a balance between organized team sport, individual activities like swimming and dancing and fun activities such as youth groups, voluntary service and family outings.
- Look for an active play buddy who can encourage your child to be more active.

Reduce screen time:

Watching too much television is often linked closely with overweight in children. Inactive behavior is not just watching television. It also includes playing electronic games, sitting for long periods of time in transit, long sleep-ins and extended phone calls. When children watch television they are not being active and are more likely to see food advertisements that encourage them to eat regardless of hunger. Televisions in bedrooms have been shown to increase viewing time. Try to:

- Limit sedentary activities like watching television to less than two hours per day.
- Avoid eating while the television is on.
- Suggest or offer alternative activities to television watching.

Resources:

<http://kidshealth.org/>

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/obesityinchildren.html>

<http://www.mypyramid.gov/>

<http://www.getfittn.com/>

<http://www.walkingworksforschoolstn.com/>

<http://www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org/>