

Encouraging a Healthy Weight for Your Child

30 to 60 minutes of play instead of watching TV can prevent some weight problems.



The number of overweight children in America has doubled since 1980. This is mainly because of unhealthy eating habits and not getting enough physical activity (exercise). Although genetics plays a role in your child's weight, you can help prevent some weight problems and improve your child's overall health by encouraging healthier eating habits and more physical activity.

Overweight children can be at risk of developing health problems, like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes. They are also more open to teasing, which can hurt their self-esteem.

How do I know if my child is overweight?

Your health care professional can help you determine whether your child's weight is within a healthy range by using a tool called Body Mass Index, or BMI. BMI is a way of looking at height and weight together, taking into consideration your child's age and sex. In children, the BMI number is plotted onto a growth chart. The following cut-offs help to identify overweight children:

85th to 95th percentile: At risk of being overweight

95th percentile or above: Overweight

BMI isn't perfect, though. Someone who has a lot of muscle or a large frame can have a high BMI, but not

necessarily have too much body fat. BMI is only one of the tools used to determine if your child's weight is a healthy one.

How much should my child weigh?

It is important to remember that there are no "ideal" heights and weights for children. Children come in all different shapes and sizes and grow at different rates. The goal is for the whole family to make healthier food choices and to increase physical activity, instead of focusing on weight and weight loss alone.

What is a good way to talk to children about weight?

Explain to your children that people come in different shapes and sizes. Let them know that you love them whatever their size. Avoid using the terms "skinny" or "fat," and don't tease them about their weight. It is best to address eating and activity as a family issue, not as the child's "problem." Explain to your children that you want them "to be healthier," and that the whole family is going to work on improving everyone's eating and exercise habits.

What are some ways to help children get more active?

Not getting enough physical activity (exercise) has been shown to cause weight gain in children. Instead of

being physically active, many children today are watching TV, playing video games, and just not moving around enough on a day-to-day basis. Small increases in physical activity over time can make a big difference. Here are some steps that you can take to help your child get moving:

- ❑ **Encourage your child to play hard at least 30 to 60 minutes a day.**
 - Go for family walks or bike rides.
 - Play sports or join a club (such as boys' or girls' clubs).
 - Walk instead of riding in a car.
 - Use a step-counter every day to motivate your child.
 - Check local YMCAs and schools for exercise programs.
- ❑ **Limit TV and video games to no more than one hour a day.**
 - Remove the TV from the child's bedroom.
 - Jump rope, dance, skate, or play frisbee with your child.
 - Take your family to the park or pool.

What are some ways to help children have better eating habits?

- Provide breakfast every day, even if you are short on time. Some good choices include: cereal, nonfat milk, yogurt, fruit, or toast.
- You decide when and where to serve meals and which foods to serve. Let your child decide whether or not to eat and how much to eat.
- Eat meals together as a family. Work around busy schedules. Encourage conversation, sharing, and laughter at meal time.
- Keep healthy foods your child likes within easy reach at home. Keep "junk" foods out of the house.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your child's physician or other health care professional. If your child has persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your child's doctor.

Here are more healthy eating suggestions

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Offer 5 helpings of fruits and vegetables <i>every day</i> (1 helping= 1/2 to 1 cup) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Limit juice drinks, sports drinks, and sodas to <i>no more than 1 can or small cup a day</i>. Encourage your child to drink water if he/she is thirsty.
Offer <i>more</i> often . . .	Offer <i>less</i> often . . .
- chicken, turkey, fish, beans, peas	- hot dogs, bologna, bacon, sausages
- nonfat milk or yogurt, low-fat cheese	- ice cream, cream cheese, chocolate milk
- unbuttered popcorn (beware of choking under age 4), bagels	- butter, margarine, gravy, candy, granola
- baked, boiled, broiled, or steamed foods	- pan fried or deep-fat fried foods
- bread, tortillas, rice, pasta	- chips, cookies, pastries, french fries

- Do not bribe or reward with food. Offer hugs, stickers, or small toys instead.
- Limit eating at fast food restaurants to no more than once a week. Fast food tends to be high in salt, fat, and extra calories. Avoid supersizing!
- Don't eat while watching TV.
- Encourage your child to help with grocery lists, shopping, and cooking meals.
- Check in with your child's school or day care center to make sure that healthy, low-fat meals and snacks are provided. If not, pack nutritious foods for your child's lunch box.
- Set a good example by:
 - not constantly dieting
 - not showing too much concern about your weight
 - eating fruits and vegetables
 - being physically active every day

Eating too many high fat foods, not eating enough fruits and vegetables, and drinking too many sodas and juice drinks contribute to weight problems. Since children do not normally overeat, parents do not need to limit the amount of food they eat.

Other resources

- *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*

Web sites

- Kaiser Permanente members.kp.org
- Produce for Better Health 5aday.com
- UCB Center for Weight & Health cnr.berkeley.edu/cwh
- Kids Health kidshealth.org

Books

- *American Academy of Pediatrics' Guide to Your Child's Nutrition: Making Peace at the Table and Building Healthy Eating Habits for Life*—William H. Dietz, 1999
- *Helping Your Child Lose Weight the Healthy Way: A Family Approach to Weight Control*—J. Levine, 2001
- *The Overweight Child: Promoting Fitness and Self-Esteem*—T. Pitman and M. Kaufman, MD, 2000



Help your child set a goal and track his/her progress.



Any improvement in physical activity or eating is great!