

# Encouraging a Healthy Weight for Your Child

Parents have the power to teach healthy habits that last a lifetime.



**D**id you know that there are twice as many overweight children in the United States today than in 1980? Unhealthy eating habits, larger portion sizes, and not getting enough exercise all contribute to the increase.

Unfortunately, overweight children are more likely to develop heart disease and diabetes. And some overweight children get teased, which can lead to low self esteem and even depression.

The good news is that by helping your whole family live a healthy lifestyle you can help prevent and decrease weight and health problems for your child. We all—children and parents—need both nutritious foods and active living to reach a healthy weight and to stay healthy.

## How do I know if my child is overweight?

Your child's doctor can use a tool called Body Mass Index (BMI) to figure out whether your child's weight is within a healthy range. BMI looks at height and weight together, taking into consideration your child's age and gender. In children, the BMI number is plotted onto a growth chart by a health professional. Children whose BMI is near the higher end of the growth chart (85th percentile and above) are considered to be overweight.

BMI is only one of the tools used to determine if your child's weight is within a healthy range. Someone with a lot of muscle or a large frame can have a high BMI, but not necessarily too much body fat. Your child's pediatrician will also consider your family's history of disease, and your child's eating and exercise habits. Your child's doctor may also order lab tests, to screen for problems such as high cholesterol.

## How much should my child weigh?

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

## How should I talk to my 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 words like "skinny" or "fat," and don't tease them about their weight. It is best to address eating and activity together as a family issue, not as the child's "problem." Let them know that you want them "to be healthier," and that the whole family is going to work on improving everyone's eating and exercise habits.

## How can I help my children be more active?

Many children today spend a lot of time watching TV, playing video games, and using the computer. Many are not getting enough exercise. Even small increases in physical activity over time can make a big difference and can be fun for the whole family. Here are some things you can do to help your whole family get moving:

- Go for family walks or bike rides.
- Walk instead of driving for short trips and errands.
- Use a step-counter every day to help motivate your family to walk.
- Check local YMCAs, schools, and community centers for exercise programs.
- Move the TV out of the bedrooms.
- Jump rope, dance, walk, skate, or ride bikes with your child.
- Take your family to the park or pool.

## How can I help my children have better eating habits?

Eating too many high-fat and high-sugar foods and not enough fruits and vegetables can lead to weight and health problems. Drinking too many sodas and juice drinks and eating for reasons other than hunger also contribute to weight gain. Sometimes children eat while they're watching TV or when they're bored, even though they're not hungry. Try to encourage children to eat only when they're hungry. Children are typically pretty good at deciding when they're full, so you don't usually need to limit the amount of healthy foods your child eats. You can help your children by keeping healthy food around the house and setting a good example. **Here are some tips for helping your family develop healthy eating habits:**

- Fuel up with 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, even if you need to work around busy schedules. Encourage conversation, sharing, and laughter at meal time.
- Turn the TV off during meals and snacks. Eating while watching TV can lead to over-eating.
- Keep healthy foods your child likes within easy reach at home. Keep "junk" foods out of the house.
- Do not bribe or reward with food. Offer hugs, stickers, praise, or small toys instead.

### Little changes. Big rewards. Are you ready?

#### Get moving

- Aim for at least 60 minutes of activity each day.
- Escape the pull of the couch—get up and get moving.

#### Pull the plug

- Limit screen time (TV, computers, and video games) to 1 to 2 hours each day.
- Move the TV out of the bedroom.

#### Eat smart

- Aim for 5 to 9 servings of fruits and vegetables a day.
- Fuel up with breakfast every day.

#### Drink well

- Choose water or non-fat milk.
- Limit soda, sports drinks, juice, and sweetened drinks—one can is equal to drinking a candy bar.

- Limit eating at fast food restaurants. Fast food tends to be high in salt, fat, and extra calories. If you do eat fast food, order small sizes and choose water or milk to drink.
- Encourage your child to help with grocery lists, shopping, and cooking.
- 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.

You are your child's most important role model, so set a good example by:

- eating fruits and vegetables
- being physically active every day
- not criticizing your own body
- keeping the focus on health, not on weight

If you and your family are interested in getting support to make healthy changes, we're here to help. Your pediatrician or local Health Education Department or Center can help connect you with resources in your area.

## Other resources

### Web sites

- [kp.org](http://kp.org)
- Produce for Better Health [5aday.com](http://5aday.com)
- Kids Health [kidshealth.org](http://kidshealth.org)
- UCB Center for Weight & Health [cnr.berkeley.edu/cwh](http://cnr.berkeley.edu/cwh)

### 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.
- *Your Child's Weight: Helping Without Harming.* Satter 2005.

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.