

Today more and more of our children are overweight, which can have devastating consequences for them, both now and in the future. Because of this increase, obesity (the medical term for excessive body fat) is much in the news today.

How can we know if our child's weight is okay, and what can we do if we find that they're overweight? This brochure will help you answer these questions.

IS MY CHILD OVERWEIGHT?

Here are three suggestions on how to determine if your child is overweight:

Using a general guideline

To help you get a general sense of whether you should be concerned about your child's weight, look at the chart on the next page, "Are your kids at risk?" put out by the Mayo Clinic in the US. As this chart shows, healthy weight in children varies with age, sex, and height.

Ask the question: Is the weight a daily obstacle?

Is your child's weight causing a reduction in his or her quality of life? For example, if he or she cannot move well, or can't fit into normal seats, or if walking causes difficulty breathing, he or she is likely overweight and should see a physician.

Do you feel that your child is overweight, but the weight doesn't seem to interfere with health or quality of life? If this is the case, a change in direction in your family's eating habits and physical activity is warranted. This shouldn't involve "dieting" or reducing calories—instead, offer more low-calorie foods like vegetables and whole fruits and increase physical activity.

Use body mass index

Body mass index (BMI) is a measurement based on height and weight that tells if a person is in a healthy range compared to his or her peers. BMI is fairly straightforward for adults, but that's not the case for children and youth. Children grow at different rates at different times, and boys and girls differ in the normal amount of body fat as they mature.

Doctors *do* use BMI to help determine if children are overweight, but they need to look at BMI in the bigger picture of the child's age and gender. It's called BMI-for-age, and is calculated on gender-specific growth charts.

If you are concerned or unsure about your child's weight, take him or her to your doctor, who will determine his or her BMI-for-age.

RESOURCES

Copies of *Canada's Physical Activity Guides for Children and Youth* are available free by calling 1 888 334-9769 or by visiting www.paguide.com

Copies of *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating* are available by visiting www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/nutrition/pube/foodguid/index.html

The Canadian Pediatric Society has more information about childhood healthy active living at: www.cps.ca/english/publications/HealthyActiveLiving.htm

OBESITY

HELPING YOUR OVERWEIGHT CHILD

Straight talk
from your doctor

Provided by your physician and the
British Columbia Medical Association
to promote better health in BC



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HOW CAN I HELP MY OVERWEIGHT CHILD?

Thankfully, there are lots of things you can do to help your child. A healthy weight is maintained by balancing the amount of energy going into your child’s body (as food and drink) and the energy being used (for growth and physical activity).

Physical activity suggestions

- Young children should engage in at least 30 minutes a day of vigorous physical activity like running or playing soccer and 60 minutes a day of moderate physical activity such as playing outdoors or biking. If your child is currently inactive, he or she should start with at least 20 minutes of moderate physical activity plus 10 minutes of vigorous physical activity per day for 1 month. After this period, increase moderate activity by 10 minutes per day and the vigorous exercise by 5 minutes per day each month.
- Ensure that the activities are fun for your child.
- Decrease activities that involve sitting, such as computer time, video games, and television by 30 minutes per day initially and then gradually decrease them further until they take up no more than 90 minutes per day.
- Provide space and time for healthy physical activity. Whenever possible be active as a family—consider skating, hiking, biking, swimming, roller skating, miniature golf, trips to the zoo or park, or anything that can be done as a group and enjoyed by all.
- Involve children in household activities like car washing, dog walking, lawn mowing, or other active household chores.
- Consider walking to school, the bus, or the shops when appropriate and possible.

Nutrition suggestions

- Make gradual changes that involve the whole family; fruit makes a great dessert for everyone.
- Encourage children to eat breakfast every day.
- Offer more cereal fibre, fruit, and vegetables, and drink more water and low-fat milk.
- Offer fewer high-fat and sweet foods and drink fewer carbonated drinks and high-sugar fruit juices.
- Offer a wide variety of healthy foods.
- Between his or her three daily meals, give your child healthy snacks such as fruit slices, carrot sticks, or whole grain, low-fat baked goods.
- Involve children in planning and preparing meals. They may be more willing to eat food they’ve helped with.
- Make eating an event. Whenever possible have everyone attend the meal—this way you can see what your children are eating and you help them avoid “passive eating” in the car, while watching television, or working on the computer.
- Don’t use food as a reward or punishment.
- Eat home-cooked meals whenever possible.
- Don’t be too restrictive. Fast food and sweet treats don’t need to be completely removed, just reduced so that they make up only a tiny fraction of your child’s diet.

What about dieting?

Although weight loss through caloric restriction (dieting) is sometimes recommended by health professionals for obese children, it is best if it can be avoided. It can be difficult for anyone, especially children, to maintain a diet. It is best to encourage a positive attitude toward food within the family by making healthy snacks readily available and ensuring that meals are nutritious and balanced and that portion sizes are reasonable. Mealtimes should be a shared time together that is both healthy and enjoyable.

General suggestions

- Ensure your child knows he or she is loved at any weight.
- Talk openly about the problem with your child. He or she may be enduring taunts and teasing at school, so don’t be afraid to bring up the subject—just be careful your concern isn’t interpreted as more criticism.

- Focus on your child’s health and positive qualities, not his or her weight.
- Gradually make changes to your whole family’s eating and exercise habits; don’t make your child feel singled-out by focusing on his or her weight.
- Help your child find ways other than food to handle successes and setbacks.
- Help your child set positive, achievable goals—goals he or she wants to achieve.
- Be a good role model for your child, with healthy eating and regular physical activity.

Are your kids at risk?

BOYS	7-Year-Old Boy	12-Year-Old Boy	17-Year-Old Boy
	4 feet 1 inch tall Normal weight: 50 lbs At-risk weight: 57 lbs Overweight: 65 lbs	5 feet tall Normal weight: 90 lbs At-risk weight: 105 lbs Overweight: 120 lbs	5 feet 10 inches tall Normal weight: 147 lbs At-risk weight: 174 lbs Overweight: 195 lbs
GIRLS	7-Year-Old Girl	12-Year-Old Girl	17-Year-Old Girl
	4 feet 1 inch tall Normal weight: 50 lbs At-risk weight: 60 lbs Overweight: 67 lbs	5 feet tall Normal weight: 90 lbs At-risk weight: 110 lbs Overweight: 125 lbs	5 feet 4 inches tall Normal weight: 125 lbs At-risk weight: 145 lbs Overweight: 170 lbs

Note that age is listed here only as a guidepost—the combination of height and weight are the most important factors.

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