

Helping Your Overweight Child



National Institute of
Diabetes and Digestive
and Kidney Diseases

WIN Weight-control
Information Network



INTRODUCTION

Many young people struggle with excess weight. Almost 1 in 3 children ages 5 to 11 is considered to be overweight or obese. Weighing too much increases the chances that young people may develop some health problems—now and later in life.

As a parent or other caregiver, you can do a lot to help your child reach and maintain a healthy weight. Healthy eating and physical activity habits are important for your child's well-being. You can take an active role to help your child—and your whole family—learn healthy habits that last a lifetime.

HOW CAN I TELL IF MY CHILD IS OVERWEIGHT?

Telling whether a child is overweight isn't always easy. Children grow at different rates at different times. Also, the amount of body fat changes with age and differs between girls and boys.



One way to determine a person's weight status is to calculate body mass index (BMI). The BMI measures a person's weight in relation to his or her height.

The BMI of children is age- and sex-specific and known as the "BMI-for-age." BMI-for-age uses growth charts created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the year 2000.

A number called a percentile shows how your child's BMI compares with the BMI of others. For example, if your child's BMI is in the 90th percentile, this means that his or her BMI is greater than the BMI of 89 percent of children of the same age and sex. The main BMI-for-age categories are these:

- healthy weight: 5th to 84th percentile
- overweight: 85th to 94th percentile
- obese: 95th percentile or greater

For an online tool that helps calculate your child's BMI and percentile, see the Resources section of this fact sheet. If you have concerns about your child's weight, speak with his or her health care provider.

WHY SHOULD I BE CONCERNED?

There are many reasons to care if your child is in the overweight or obese category. In the short run, he or she may develop joint pain and/or breathing problems. These health issues may make it hard to keep up with friends. Some children may develop obesity-related health problems, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol, because of excess weight.

Youth who weigh too much may become obese adults. This increases the chances that they may develop heart disease and certain cancers as adults.

If you are worried about your child's weight, talk to your health care provider. He or she can check your child's overall health and tell you if weight management may be helpful. Don't put your child on a weight-loss diet unless your health care provider tells you to.

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD DEVELOP HEALTHY HABITS?

Parents and other caregivers can play an important role in helping children build healthy eating and physical activity habits that will last a lifetime.

To help your child develop healthy habits,

- be a positive role model. Children are good learners and they often mimic what they see. Choose healthy foods and active pastimes for yourself.
- involve the whole family in building healthy eating and physical activity habits. This benefits everyone and doesn't single out the child who is overweight.





HEALTHY SNACK IDEAS

Keep healthy snack foods on hand. Try these:

- air-popped popcorn without butter
- fresh, frozen, dried, or canned fruit served plain or with low-fat yogurt
- fresh vegetables, like baby carrots, cucumber, zucchini, or tomatoes
- low-sugar, whole-grain cereal with low-fat or fat-free milk or a milk substitute fortified with calcium and vitamin D

WHAT TIPS MAY HELP MY CHILD EAT BETTER?

A healthy eating plan limits foods that lead to weight gain. Foods that should be limited include these:

- fats that are solid at room temperature (like butter and lard)
- foods that are high in calories, sugar, and salt like sugary drinks, chips, cookies, fries, and candy
- refined grains (white flour, rice, and pasta)

Just like adults, children should replace unhealthy foods with a variety of healthy foods, including these:

- fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds, and whole grains like brown rice
- fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products or substitutes, like soy beverages that have added calcium and vitamin D
- lean meats, poultry, seafood, beans and peas, soy products, and eggs

The following changes may help your child eat healthier at home:

- Buy and serve more fruits and vegetables (fresh, frozen, canned, or dried). Let your child choose them at the store. Use a new fruit to make smoothies.



- Buy fewer high-calorie foods like sugary drinks, chips, cookies, fries, and candy.
- Offer your child water or low-fat milk instead of fruit juice.

Other ways to support healthy eating habits include these:

- Make healthy choices easy. Put nutritious foods where they are easy to see and keep any high-calorie foods out of sight.
- Eat fast food less often. When you do visit a fast food restaurant, encourage your family to choose the healthier options, such as salads with low-fat dressing.
- Plan healthy meals and eat together as a family so you can explore a variety of foods together.

To help your child develop a healthy attitude toward food, try these ideas:

- Don't use food as a reward when encouraging kids to eat. Promising dessert to a child for eating vegetables, for example, sends the message that vegetables are less valuable than dessert.
- Explain the reasons for eating whatever it is you are serving. Don't make your child clean his or her plate.
- Limit eating to specific meal and snack times. At other times, the kitchen is "closed."
- Avoid large portions. Start with small servings and let your child ask for more if he or she is still hungry.





FUN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IDEAS

Activities that kids choose to do on their own are often best. Your child may enjoy trying the following:

- catching and throwing a ball
- climbing on a jungle gym or climbing wall
- dancing
- jumping rope
- playing hopscotch
- riding a bike
- shooting baskets

WHAT TIPS MAY HELP MY CHILD BE MORE ACTIVE?

Kids need about 60 minutes of physical activity a day, but this doesn't have to happen all at once. Several short 10- or even 5-minute periods of activity throughout the day are just as good. If your children are not used to being active, encourage them to start with what they can do and build up to 60 minutes a day.

Here are some ways to help your child move every day:

- Set a good example. Show your child that you are physically active and that you have fun doing it.
- Encourage your child to join a sports team or class, such as basketball, dance, or soccer at school or at your local community or recreation center.
- If your child feels uncomfortable participating in activities like sports, help him or her find physical activities that are fun and not competitive, such as dancing to music, playing tag, jumping rope, or riding a bike.
- Be active together as a family. Assign active chores such as making the beds, sweeping/raking, or vacuuming. Plan active outings such as a walk through a local park.

Kids spend a lot of time sitting down watching TV, playing video games, or using the computer or hand-held devices like cell phones. The following tips may help cut back on some of this inactive time:

- Limit screen time to no more than 2 hours per day.
- Help your child find fun things to do like acting out favorite books or stories, or doing a family art project.
- Encourage your child to get up and move during TV commercials and discourage snacking when sitting in front of a screen.

WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE HELP?

If you have changed your family's eating and physical activity habits and your child has not reached a healthy weight, ask your health care provider about other options. He or she may be able to refer you to a weight-control specialist or program.

Here are some things a weight-control program should do:

- Include a variety of health care professionals on staff, including doctors, exercise physiologists, psychiatrists or psychologists, and registered dietitians.
- Evaluate your child's weight, growth, and health before enrolling him or her in the program. The program should also monitor these factors while your child is enrolled.
- Adapt to the specific age and abilities of your child. Programs for 4-year-olds should be different from those for 10-year-olds.
- Help your family keep up healthy eating and physical activity behaviors after the program ends.

BE SUPPORTIVE

Throughout any process or program that you undertake to address your child's weight, be supportive. Help your child set specific goals and track his or her progress. Reward successes with praise and hugs. Be positive.

Tell your child that he or she is loved, special, and important. Children's feelings about themselves are often based on how they think their parents and other caregivers feel about them.

Listen to your child's concerns about his or her weight. Overweight children probably know better than anyone else that they have a weight problem. They need support, understanding, and encouragement from caring adults.



Research

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) conducts and supports a broad range of basic and clinical obesity research. More information about obesity research is available at <http://www.obesityresearch.nih.gov>.

Resources

Additional Reading from the Weight-control Information Network

The following publication is available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications> and also by calling the Weight-control Information Network (WIN) toll-free at 1-877-946-4627:

- **Helping Your Child: Tips for Parents** suggests ways that parents can take active roles in guiding their children to eat healthy foods and be physically active. This brochure is also available in Spanish.

Additional Resources

- **2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans.** U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Discusses the benefits of physical activity and the types and amounts that Americans need to stay healthy. <http://www.health.gov/paguidelines>
- **BAM! Body and Mind** answers kids' questions about health, including physical activity and nutrition. It also offers a "Teacher's Corner" for educators. <http://www.bam.gov>
- **BMI Percentile Calculator for Child and Teen.** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. An online tool for calculating your child's body mass index (BMI). <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/dnpabmi>
- **Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010.** HHS and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Provides detailed information on how to improve your eating habits. <http://www.health.gov/DietaryGuidelines>
- **HealthyChildren.** American Academy of Pediatrics. Offers articles for parents about overweight and obesity. <http://www.healthychildren.org>
- **Kidnetic** provides tips on healthy eating and physical activity for kids and parents. <http://www.kidnetic.com>
- **KidsHealth** offers nutrition and fitness information for kids. <http://www.kidshealth.org>
- **MyPlate.** USDA. Offers information about making healthier food choices and being active. <http://www.choosemyplate.gov>
- **National Diabetes Education Program.** Provides information about diabetes and obesity prevention and control. <http://www.yourdiabetesinfo.org>
- **National Kidney Disease Education Program.** Publications provide information about detecting and managing kidney disease, as well as the impact of kidney disease on African Americans. <http://nkdep.nih.gov/resources.shtml>
- **We Can! Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition** is a national program designed for families and communities to help children maintain a healthy weight. <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/wecan/index.htm>

Inclusion of resources is for information only and does not imply endorsement by NIDDK or WIN.

Participants in clinical trials can play a more active role in their own health care, gain access to new research treatments before they are widely available, and help others by contributing to medical research. For more information, visit <http://www.clinicaltrials.gov>.

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The Weight-control Information Network (WIN) is a national information service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). WIN provides the general public, health professionals, and the media with science-based, up-to-date, culturally relevant materials and tips. Topics include healthy eating, barriers to physical activity, portion control, and eating and physical activity myths.

Publications produced by WIN are carefully reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts. This fact sheet was also reviewed by Gary D. Foster, Ph.D., Laura Carnell Professor of Medicine, Public Health and Psychology, and Director, Center for Obesity Research and Education, Temple University.

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