

## Maintaining a Healthy Weight for your Child

The topic of overweight children has been getting a lot of attention recently. Over the past several years, rates of obesity in children have risen. This has led doctors, parents, teachers, researchers, the media and politicians to search for both the cause and ways to change this trend. Obesity is a major and growing problem among youth in every community.

Overweight and obesity in children is defined by Body Mass Index, or BMI. This number is calculated from the weight and height. Because the normal BMI changes with age, there are graphs available to compare a child's BMI to the normal range for their age. A child with a BMI higher than 85 percent of the children their age is called "at risk for overweight" and if their BMI is higher than 95 percent of the children their age they are called "overweight." At your child's physicals, their doctor or healthcare provider should check height, weight and calculate BMI.

Parents often say "it's only baby fat," and expect that their child will grow to have a healthy weight. This does happen, but only if the child develops healthy habits around diet and exercise. After the age of 6, an overweight child has more than 50 percent chance of being an obese adult. This goes up to 70 to 80 percent for overweight adolescents. Obesity contributes to diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, heart disease and obstructive sleep apnea. Overweight children have higher rates of asthma, bone and joint problems, as well as psychological and social problems.

For both children and adults, maintaining a healthy weight is all about eating a healthy diet and getting enough exercise. Many children today are less active than in the past – they do not walk or bike to school, PE is limited, and they are spending too much time in front of the TV, computers and video games. It can also be challenging for a busy family to keep their diet healthy – fast food and prepared foods are convenient and often cheap, but can give you more calories than you need and not enough fresh fruits and vegetables.

There are things you can do at every age to help your child develop healthy habits. For infants, breastfeeding has been shown to lower rates of overweight and obesity in childhood. But whether you breastfeed or formula feed your baby, it is important to feed them when they are hungry and not every time they are fussy or simply want to suck on something. Even at these early stages, the baby can learn to eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full. Pacifiers, thumbs and other body parts can be sucked on when they are not hungry – one of the easiest ways for baby to soothe themselves is to suck on something.

The toddler years are challenging in many ways – your baby has started walking, talking, letting you know what they want and testing limits. Most toddlers will get picky about their eating between the age of 1 and 2, and usually their appetite decreases because they don't need as many calories – they aren't growing as fast as when they were babies. Toddlers will have 'good days' and 'bad days' when it comes to eating. The parent's job is to decide *what*, the child's job is to decide *how much* to eat. Offer your child lots of fresh fruits, vegetables and healthy foods. Don't be upset or concerned if they don't eat much – when they are hungry they will eat. Limit treats – crackers, chips and sweets are OK sometimes, but not more than once a day, and not every day. Same for milk – at most 16 to 20 ounces a day. Toddlers like to graze – eat small amounts frequently through the day. Make sure that the snacks your child gets are the same food you would give at a meal – veggies, fruits, whole grains, yogurt, pasta or other healthy foods. Juice can also be a place where children get more sugar than they need. Make juice a

birthday party treat, unless it's orange juice, which is the closest thing to a fruit that you'll get out of a carton.

The preschool years are a good time to start eating dinner together as a family, if you aren't already. Research has shown that children who eat dinner with at least one parent more than 3 days per week have healthier diets, eat a wider variety of foods and have lower rates of obesity. Your child may be a picky eater and only like a limited number of foods, but if you are eating healthy foods in front of them, they will eventually imitate you...even if it takes a while. Never force your child to eat when they are not hungry. It's important for them to learn to stop eating when they are full. It's OK to ask them to eat a little bit of everything on their plate, but don't make them clear the plate if they don't want to.

The elementary and middle school years are a time to continue good habits around eating and exercise. Encourage your child to spend at least 30 to 60 minutes playing actively every day. Walking or biking to school, walking together as a family, playing a sport or just playing with their friends, and doing chores are all good ways to be active. Limiting television, video game and computer time is one of the most important things you can do to help your child develop good habits. Kids who watch more than 1 or 2 hours of TV per day are at higher risk of being overweight – not only because they are less active, but they tend to eat foods that are less healthy, especially if they are snacking while watching TV. Make sure that you have healthy foods available at home – if you keep a bowl of fruit on the counter, your child will eat more fruit. Limit soda, juices and sugary drinks to once or twice a week, drink low fat milk and limit fast food to once a week or less.

If your child is already overweight, remember that it is more important to teach them to exercise and have healthy eating habits than it is to lower their weight or put them on a restrictive diet. Maintaining a healthy weight is a lifelong process that begins early, perhaps even in infancy. It's never too late to learn good habits, and the best way to teach your child how to be healthy is to do it yourself.