



Overweight Children

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Why Are Overweight Children a Concern?

Overweight children are becoming a serious health problem, with over 25 percent of children considered overweight or at risk. Overweight children can experience many emotional and physical problems. Emotional problems include altered body image, depression, and poor self-esteem. Physical concerns are that overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults. Adults who are overweight have an increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and certain types of cancer. The more overweight a child is and the longer a child remains overweight, the more likely the child will become an overweight adult. In fact, adolescents who are overweight are more related to overweight adults than a child's birth weight.

Cause of Overweight Children

The cause of overweight children is poorly understood. Genetics, environment, and social factors are thought to influence weight problems in children. Studies of twins and of adopted children and their biological and adopted parents suggest that genetics influence weight. Even how body fat is distributed appears to be influenced by genetics. Genetic tendency alone, however, does not determine whether a child will become overweight. Environmental factors such as diet and physical activity also contribute to overweight children.

Role of Diet

With respect to diet, an intake of only 50 to 100 excess calories per day can result in a five to ten pound weight gain per year. However, very little difference in calorie intake has been found between overweight and non-overweight children. For this reason, it is important that parents encourage healthy eating habits in children.

Role of Physical Inactivity

Physical inactivity is a major contributor to weight problems in children. An important factor responsible for children's inactivity is sedentary activities. In large population studies of school-aged children, the amount of time spent participating in sedentary activities was associated with weight gain. In addition, it is reported that children consume high calorie foods while participating in sedentary activities. One report estimates that weight gain in children increased by two percent for each hour of sedentary activity. For these reasons, the American

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Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents limit the amount of time children participate in sedentary activities to one to two hours a day.

What Can You Do?

Decreasing weight gain in children requires an environment which encourages children and families to adopt healthy eating and physical activity habits. For children who are already overweight, medical experts advise **NOT** to put children on calorie restrictive diets, unless recommended and supervised by a physician. Children's diets must provide enough energy and essential nutrients for proper growth and development. An overweight child needs only to maintain weight or reduce the rate of weight gain. The goal is to let the child grow into his or her weight, but not to actually lose weight. Food restriction is frightening to children; hunger, whether physically or emotionally based, is a powerful drive. Limiting sweets, fats, and empty calorie foods is wise, but food intake should not be limited to the point weight loss occurs. Parents and caretakers play an important role in children's food choices. They do this by making healthy foods available for meals and snacks and by modeling good eating habits. Choosing lower fat foods, lower fat preparation methods, and lower fat snacks for the whole family is a healthy approach.

Children under two years of age should **NOT** have dietary fat limited. Fat is a major source of calories for proper growth and development for children under two years of age. Severely limiting fat can hinder growth and development of children at any age. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends a fat intake of 30 to 35 percent of calories for children 2 to 3 years of age and 25 to 35 percent of calories for children and adolescents 4 to 18 years of age. This recommendation does not mean severely limiting fat in the diets of children of any age. Growth failure has been reported among children consuming diets severely limited in fat. The major goal for a child's diet is to provide enough calories and nutrients to promote normal growth and development.

The following are tips by Ellyn Satter, M.S., R.D., in her book *How to Get Your Kid to Eat ... But Not Too Much*:

- Treat the overweight child with respect and sensitivity.
- Don't overreact. Children often go through chubby stages, then naturally slim down. When parents overreact they can promote the very problems they are trying to solve.

- Allow the child to control the amount eaten. Even with an overweight child, do not withhold food. Reassure the child there will be plenty to eat.
- Set up regular meals and snack times, with plenty of satisfying foods available at these times, but not in between. Structure and reassurance works. Setting limits should not be done in a punishing way.
- Make it permanent. Develop a realistic sustainable system. Be consistent.
- Mealtimes should be pleasant, without scolding or grievances. Turn off the TV; it destroys family interaction and makes impossible the gratifying of children's needs for attention, support, and limits.
- Use nutrition concerns, rather than weight concerns, in dealing with problem situations.
- Include some high-calorie food and teach children to savor it, eating slowly, enjoying it. Teach them to enjoy small quantities. Don't worry about an occasional overeating situation.
- Teach eating slowly. Model slow and attentive eating; talk about eating slowly, and work on it together. This helps the child learn how to interpret cues for hunger and fullness, and how to regulate how much he or she eats.
- Avoid food reminders. Children may eat more when food is in sight.
- Feel comfortable about food. If parents are anxious about eating, this can affect the child's eating.
- Physical activity can help. Encourage the child to be physically active. The best way is to let physical activity come naturally. Don't be too protective, but don't pressure children to be physically active.
- Strengthen self-esteem. Help children grow up as emotionally healthy as possible, with good family relationships. Respect them as individuals; be sensitive, patient, and curb responses so as not to overwhelm them.
- Help the child look nice. Buy clothing that looks and feels good.
- Let the child develop the weight that is right for him or her. Being unrealistic is setting a child up for failure.
- Both parents need to be in agreement. The child needs clear and reasonable guidelines from parents.
- Deal with family and marital problems. Many eating problems are traced to concerns over family issues.

Even more important, parents and caretakers should encourage children to be physically active. Physical activity in childhood may help establish life-long habits for physical activity. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend children participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week. Unfortunately, there are fewer chances to be physically active at school or home. Parents need to be physically active with their children and adopt physical family activities. While many kids are not good at sports, all children can participate in aerobic activities that don't require athletic talent. Swimming, bicycling, walking, or running are all aerobic activities that help cardiovascular fitness.

Some tips for childhood physical activity are:

- Family life, not school, is the strongest influence on a child's physical activity habits. Parents should set a good example by pursuing activities with their children. It's never too early, or too late, to begin being physical active with your kids.
- Physical activity should be fun. If it's not, the child will soon abandon it. The saying "no pain, no gain" is even more dangerous for kids than for adults.
- Avoid "Little League Syndrome." A strong emphasis on winning creates undue tension and anxiety in youngsters.
- Teach children to compete against themselves, not others. Emphasize that improvement is a reward in itself.
- It is important to stimulate an early interest in aerobic activities that are likely to become lifelong habits. Swimming, walking, and cycling are good aerobic choices.
- Encourage physical fitness by turning the television off and giving kids unstructured playtime.

While attention to overweight children is important, an over-emphasis on body weight should be avoided. Over-concern with body weight during childhood often leads to eating disorders. Eating disorders in turn can hinder children's growth and development. In addition, eating disorders may increase risk of diseases, such as osteoporosis, later in life. In a survey of children, grades three through six, 45% wanted to lose weight and 37% had tried to lose weight. In addition, nearly seven percent of children scored in the eating disorder range!

Summary

Good health is a family affair. Parents have an important role in the health of their children. Habits are established in childhood and prevention begins in childhood. Adopt a healthful approach to diet and physical activity early for the whole family. Teaching children to select well-balanced diets, encouraging physical activity, and supporting positive self images are gifts that last a lifetime.

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