

HEALTHY HABITS

The percentage of overweight children in the United States is growing at an alarming rate, with 1 out of 3 kids now considered overweight or obese. A good phone application to track nutrition and keep a diet diary is “**My Fitness Pal**”—this can help you monitor your nutrition over time.

Many kids are spending less time exercising and more time in front of the TV, computer, or video-game console. And today's busy families have fewer free moments to prepare nutritious, home-cooked meals. From fast food to electronics, quick and easy is the reality for many people.

Preventing kids from becoming overweight means adapting the way your family eats and exercises, and how you spend time together. Helping kids lead healthy lifestyles begins with parents who lead by example.

Is Your Child Overweight?

Body mass index (BMI) uses height and weight measurements to estimate a person's body fat. But calculating BMI on your own can be complicated. An easier way is to use a BMI calculator.

Once your child's BMI is known, it can be plotted on a standard BMI chart. Kids ages 2 to 19 fall into one of four categories:

- **underweight:** BMI below the 5th percentile
- **normal weight:** BMI at the 5th and less than the 85th percentile
- **overweight:** BMI at the 85th and below 95th percentiles
- **obese:** BMI at or above 95th percentile

BMI calculations aren't used to estimate body fat in babies and young toddlers. For kids younger than 2, doctors use weight-for-length charts to determine how a baby's weight compares with his or her length. Any child who falls at or above the 85th percentile may be considered overweight.

BMI is not a perfect measure of body fat and can be misleading in some situations. For example, a muscular person may have a high BMI without being overweight (extra muscle adds to body weight — but not fatness). Also, BMI might be difficult to interpret during puberty when kids are experiencing periods of rapid growth. It's important to remember that BMI is usually a good indicator — but is *not* a direct measurement — of body fat.

If you're worried that your child or teen may be overweight, make an appointment with your doctor, who can assess eating and activity habits and make suggestions on how to make positive changes. The doctor also may decide to screen for some of the medical conditions that can be associated with obesity.

Depending on your child's BMI (or weight-for-length measurement), age, and health, the doctor may refer you to a registered dietitian for additional advice and, possibly, might recommend a comprehensive weight management program.

The Effects of Obesity

Obesity increases the risk for serious health conditions like type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol — all once considered exclusively adult diseases. Obese kids also may be prone to low self-esteem that stems from being teased, bullied, or rejected by peers.

Kids who are unhappy with their weight may be more likely than average-weight kids to:

- develop unhealthy dieting habits such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia
- be more prone to depression
- be at risk for substance abuse

Overweight and obese kids are at risk for developing medical problems that affect their present and future health and quality of life, including:

- high blood pressure, high cholesterol and abnormal blood lipid levels, insulin resistance, and type 2 diabetes
- bone and joint problems
- shortness of breath that makes exercise, sports, or any physical activity more difficult and may aggravate the symptoms or increase the chances of developing asthma
- restless or disordered sleep patterns, such as obstructive sleep apnea
- tendency to mature earlier (overweight kids may be taller and more sexually mature than their peers, raising expectations that they should act as old as they look, not as old as they are; overweight girls may have irregular menstrual cycles and fertility problems in adulthood)
- liver and gall bladder disease
- depression

Cardiovascular risk factors present in childhood (including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes) can lead to serious medical problems like heart disease, heart failure, and stroke as adults. Preventing or treating overweight and obesity in kids may reduce the risk of developing cardiovascular disease as they get older.

Causes of Overweight

A number of factors contribute to becoming overweight. Genetics, lifestyle habits, or a combination of both may be involved. In some instances, endocrine problems, genetic syndromes, and medications can be associated with excessive weight gain.

Much of what we eat is quick and easy — from fat-laden fast food to microwave and prepackaged meals. Daily schedules are so jam-packed that there's little time to prepare healthier meals or to squeeze in some exercise. Portion sizes, in the home and out, have grown greatly.

Plus, now more than ever life is sedentary — kids spend more time playing with electronic devices, from computers to handheld video game systems, than actively playing outside. Television is a major culprit.

Kids younger than 6 spend an average of 2 hours a day in front of a screen, mostly watching TV, DVDs, or videos. Older kids and teens average 4.5 hours a day watching TV, DVDs, or videos. When computer use and video games are included, time spent in front of a screen increases to over 7 hours a day! Kids who watch more than 4 hours a day are more likely to be overweight compared with kids who watch 2 hours or less.

Not surprisingly, TV in the bedroom is also linked to increased likelihood of being overweight. In other words, for many kids, once they get home from school, virtually all of their free time is spent in front of one screen or another.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that kids over 2 years old not spend more than 1-2 hours a day in front of a screen. The AAP also discourages *any* screen time for children younger than 2 years old.

Many kids don't get enough physical activity. Although physical education (PE) in schools can help kids get up and moving, more and more PE programs or cutting down the time spent on fitness-building activities. One study showed that gym classes offered third-graders just 25 minutes of vigorous activity each week.

Current guidelines recommend that kids over 2 years old get at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week. Babies and toddlers should be active for 15 minutes every hour (a total of 3 hours for every 12 waking hours) each day.

Genetics also play a role — genes help determine body type and how your body stores and burns fat just like they help determine other traits. Genes alone, however, cannot explain the current obesity crisis. Because both genes and habits can be passed down from one generation to the next, multiple members of a family may struggle with weight.

People in the same family tend to have similar eating patterns, maintain the same levels of physical activity, and adopt the same attitudes toward being overweight. Studies have shown that a child's risk of obesity greatly increases if one or more parent is overweight or obese.

Stock Up on Healthy Foods

Kids, especially younger ones, will eat mostly what's available at home. That's why it's important to control the supply lines — the foods that you serve for meals and have on hand for snacks.

Follow these basic guidelines:

- Work fruits and vegetables into the daily routine, aiming for the goal of at least five servings a day. Be sure you serve fruit or vegetables at every meal.
- Make it easy for kids to choose healthy snacks by keeping fruits and vegetables on hand and ready to eat. Other good snacks include low-fat yogurt, peanut butter and celery, or whole-grain crackers and cheese.
- Serve lean meats and other good sources of protein, such as fish, eggs, beans, and nuts.
- Choose whole-grain breads and cereals so kids get more fiber.
- Limit fat intake by avoiding fried foods and choosing healthier cooking methods, such as broiling, grilling, roasting, and steaming. Choose low-fat or nonfat dairy products.
- Limit fast food and low-nutrient snacks, such as chips and candy. But don't completely ban favorite snacks from your home. Instead, make them "once-in-a-while" foods, so kids don't feel deprived.
- Limit sugary drinks, such as soda and fruit-flavored drinks. Serve water and low-fat milk instead.

Be a Role Model

The best way for you to encourage healthy eating is to eat well yourself. Kids will follow the lead of the adults they see every day. By eating fruits and vegetables and not overindulging in the less nutritious stuff, you'll be sending the right message.

Another way to be a good role model is to serve appropriate portions and not overeat. Talk about your feelings of fullness, especially with younger children. You might say, "This is delicious, but I'm

full, so I'm going to stop eating." Similarly, parents who are always dieting or complaining about their bodies may foster these same negative feelings in their kids. Try to keep a positive approach about food.

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