



# Childhood Obesity

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Childhood Obesity has become an epidemic in developed nations, with the CDC reporting that it has tripled over the last 30 to 40 years. In the United States, obesity increased from 7% in 1980 to more than 18 percent in 2015-2016 among children between the ages of 6-11. In the same year, the obesity rate increased to more than 20 percent among children aged 12 to 19. Obesity is much more than just being a little overweight, it is being significantly overweight, and can lead to severe health problems. Learning about the problem and potential solutions is the first step to helping combat childhood obesity.

## PROBLEMS AFFECTING OVERWEIGHT CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS:

- Risk factors for heart disease, such as high cholesterol and high blood pressure, occur with increased frequency in overweight children and adolescents compared to children with a healthy weight.
- Type 2 diabetes, previously considered an adult disease, has increased dramatically in children and adolescents. Overweight and obesity are closely linked to type 2 diabetes.
- Overweight adolescents have a 70% chance of becoming overweight or obese adults. This increases to 80% if one or more parent is overweight or obese.
- Overweight or obese adults are at risk for a number of health problems including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and some forms of cancer.
- The most immediate consequence of being overweight as perceived by the children themselves is social discrimination. This is associated with poor self-esteem and depression.

## CAUSES FOR BECOMING OVERWEIGHT:

- Being overweight in children and adolescents is generally caused by lack of physical activity, unhealthy eating patterns, or a combination of the two, with genetics and lifestyle both playing important roles in determining a child's weight.
- Our society has become very sedentary. Television, computer and video games contribute to children's inactive lifestyles.
- 43% of adolescents watch more than 2 hours of television each day.
- Children, especially girls, become less active as they move through adolescence.

## DETERMINING CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENT OBESITY:

- Doctors and other health care professionals are the best people to determine whether your child or adolescent's weight is healthy, and they can help rule out rare medical problems as the cause of unhealthy weight.
- A Body Mass Index (BMI) can be calculated from measurements of height and weight. Health professionals often use a BMI "growth chart" to help them assess whether a child or adolescent is overweight.
- A physician will also consider your child or adolescent's age and growth patterns to determine whether his or her weight is healthy.

## GENERAL SUGGESTIONS:

- Let your child know he or she is loved and appreciated whatever his or her weight. An overweight child probably knows better than anyone else that he or she has a weight problem. Overweight children need

support, acceptance, and encouragement from their parents.

- Focus on your child's health and positive qualities, not your child's weight.
- Try not to make your child feel different if he or she is overweight but focus on gradually changing your family's physical activity and eating habits.
- Be a good role model for your child. If your child sees you enjoying healthy foods and physical activity, he or she is more likely to do the same now and for the rest of his or her life.
- Realize that an appropriate goal for many overweight children is to maintain their current weight while growing normally in height.

### **PHYSICAL ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS:**

- Be physically active. It is recommended that Americans accumulate at least 30 minutes (adults) or 60 minutes (children) of moderate physical activity most days of the week. Even greater amounts of physical activity may be necessary for the prevention of weight gain, for weight loss, or for sustaining weight loss.
- Plan family activities that provide everyone with exercise and enjoyment.
- Provide a safe environment for your children and their friends to play actively; encourage swimming, biking, skating, ball sports, and other fun activities.
- Reduce the amount of time you and your family spend in sedentary activities, such as watching TV or playing video games. Limit TV time to less than 2 hours a day.

### **HEALTHY EATING SUGGESTIONS:**

- Follow the Dietary Guidelines for healthy eating: <https://health.gov/our-work/food-nutrition/2015-2020-dietary-guidelines>
- Guide your family's choices rather than dictate foods.
- Encourage your child to eat when hungry and to eat slowly.
- Eat meals together as a family as often as possible.
- Carefully cut down on the amount of fat and calories in your family's diet.
- Don't place your child on a restrictive diet.
- Avoid the use of food as a reward.
- Avoid withholding food as punishment.
- Children should be encouraged to drink water and to limit intake of beverages with added sugars, such as soft drinks, fruit juice drinks, and sports drinks.
- Plan for healthy snacks.
- Stock the refrigerator with fat-free or low-fat milk, fresh fruit, and vegetables instead of soft drinks or snacks that are high in fat, calories, or added sugars and low in essential nutrients.
- Aim to eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day.
- Discourage eating meals or snacks while watching TV.
- Eating a healthy breakfast is a good way to start the day and may be important in achieving and maintaining a healthy weight.

### **IF YOUR CHILD IS OVERWEIGHT:**

- Many overweight children who are still growing will not need to lose weight, but can reduce their rate of weight gain so that they can "grow into" their weight.
- Your child's diet should be safe and nutritious. It should include all of the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) for vitamins, minerals, and protein and contain the foods from the MyPlate dietary guidelines. Any weight-loss diet should be low in calories (energy) only, not in essential nutrients.
- Even with extremely overweight children, weight loss should be gradual.
- Crash diets and diet pills can compromise growth and are not recommended by many health care



professionals.

- Weight lost during a diet is frequently regained unless children are motivated to change their eating habits and activity levels for a lifetime.
- Weight control must be considered a lifelong effort.
- Any weight management program for children should be supervised by a physician.

### **INITIATIVES IN CONNECTICUT:**

Help Me Grow is partnering with Connecticut Children's Weight Management Program to offer help for children and their families looking for resources for maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and assistance with their weight management efforts. As a result of this collaboration, Help Me Grow invites you to call Child Development Infoline (CDI), for information on programs in your community, printed materials, and websites that might be of interest to you.

Call Child Development Infoline (CDI), Monday through Friday, from 8am-6pm, at 1-800-505-7000 for information on:

- Physical Fitness & Exercise Programs
- Camps
- Parks & Recreation Programs
- Local Farmers Markets
- Nutrition & Weight Management Programs
- Support Groups
- Tips on healthy eating and ways to keep your child active

Child Development Infoline takes great pride in working individually with families to understand their needs, connect them to the best services available, and follow up to ensure their needs are being met.

For additional resources on childhood obesity, which includes, nutrition tips, the importance of physical activity to prevent the condition, how to measure your Body Mass Index (BMI), and much more, see the following:

- AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS' (AAP) resources on childhood obesity, see the following website links:
  - Prevention and Treatment of Childhood Overweight and Obesity: <https://www.aap.org/en-us/aap-voices/Pages/Childhood-Obesity.aspx>
  - The healthychildren.org site on nutrition and fitness: <http://www.healthychildren.org/english/healthy-living/fitness/pages/Encouraging-Your-Child-to-be-Physically-Active.aspx>
- Connecticut Department of Public Health's Nutrition, Physical Activity & Obesity Prevention Program: <https://portal.ct.gov/DPH/Health-Education-Management-Surveillance/Nutrition-Physical-Activity-and-Obesity-Prevention-Program/Nutrition-Physical-Activity-Obesity-Prevention-Program>
- Connecticut Department of Education's: Connecticut's Coordinated Approach to School Health, which links to various health related programs in Connecticut schools: <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Health-Education/Comprehensive-School-Health-Education>
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's resources on childhood obesity and other helpful resources: <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/>
- For additional facts and tips on preventing obesity, visit the website of, "Our Family World", <http://www.ourfamilyworld.com/2012/01/17/the-facts-on-childhood-obesity/>



*SOURCE: Connecticut State Department of Education; Office of Early Childhood; Connecticut Department of Public Health; Centers for Disease Control & Prevention; American Academy of Pediatrics; Child Development Infoline (CDI)*

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