

Childhood Obesity

The statistics are alarming. The CDC reports that one in every three American schoolchildren is overweight. And half of those overweight kids can be classified as obese. Obesity rates for children have tripled since 1980. Not only have the rates of overweight increased but also the heaviest children today are much heavier than those in earlier surveys.

Childhood obesity is a serious medical condition. Overweight children are targets for teasing and bullying. But there are physical concerns too. High blood pressure and high cholesterol increase the risk of heart disease and stroke later on. High triglycerides raise the risk for type 2 diabetes, a disease that used to affect only adults. Obesity makes asthma and sleep disorders worse. It also contributes to problems like hip displacement and knee fractures. Excess weight in girls may lead to early menstruation, a risk factor for breast cancer.

6 KEY PREVENTION STRATEGIES

The specific causes for childhood obesity are not completely understood. Some people blame poor eating habits and point to fast food and school lunches. Others focus on inactivity and point to TV, computers, video games and fewer athletic programs. But researchers do recognize that children are consuming more calories and moving less.

One of the best strategies to reduce childhood obesity is to improve the diet and exercise habits of the whole family. "Getting kids to make healthier choices is not the result of a single action, such as putting them on a diet," says childhood obesity expert Dianne Stanton Ward. "Healthy weight development is a family issue, not a child issue."

1. Make Healthy Eating a Family Priority

Encourage your kids to make better food decisions. Start in the kitchen. Successful strategies include:

- Make sure your kids eat a healthy breakfast every day.
- Keep healthy snacks on hand including fruits and whole-grain options.
- Make time for family meals. Try to eat together at least 3 or 4 times a week!



- Include vegetables at every meal.
- Store especially tempting foods, like cookies or chips, out of immediate eyesight, like on a high shelf. Move the healthy food to the front at eye level

2. Reduce Sugar and Fat in the Foods You Serve.

- Switch to low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt and cheese
- Choose lean cuts of meat like skinless chicken or extra-lean ground beef for hamburgers or pasta sauces
- Roast or grill instead of fry
- Substitute olive or vegetable oil for butter
- Substitute water or low-fat milk for sugar-sweetened beverages
- Switch to whole-grain breakfast cereals with lower sugar
- Switch desserts like ice cream or cookies for fruit-based desserts.

3. Keep an Eye on Portion Size.

- Use smaller plates for kids.
- Portions should be about the size of the back of a fist—a child's fist for a child's portion.
- Start with a small portion. Children can have seconds if they are still hungry.
- Don't force kids to clean their plates if they are full.

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Key Prevention Strategies (continued)

4. Shop Smart

When grocery shopping for your family, don't let your kids sway your decisions based on the latest ads. And don't be persuaded by enthusiastic front-of-the-box claims. Not sure about a food? Check the Nutrition Facts and ingredient list on the back to make the best choices.

5. Make Physical Activity a Family Affair

Children should get 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity every day. It's up to you to make physical activity a family affair. Find activities you can do together as a family. When you show a commitment to increasing activity, it raises the stakes for your child. Consider these activities:

- Plan a day trip to go hiking, kayaking or cycling.
- Go swimming together! Look for local indoor pools you can join.
- Just going out to shoot some baskets can be a great way to connect while getting cardiovascular exercise.
- Take a walk! This is the cheapest and easiest option. Do errands together on foot!

6. Limit Screen Time

It is estimated that 8- to 18-year-olds spend, on average, 7.5 hours a day using entertainment media including TV, cell phones, computers, video games and movies. It's no surprise that only one-third of them get the recommended levels of physical activity. Here are some strategies to consider for limiting media time and promoting physical activity:

- Chart your family's TV and other media viewing. Discuss it as a family.
- Establish family rules and limits about TV use. Keep it off during meals.
- Read to young children. Visit the library together often. Encourage reading in older children.
- Cut back your own TV viewing! Remember, you're a role model for your children.



SUMMARY

Parents and caregivers can set a great example for the whole family by creating a healthy environment at home. This can mean making fruits and vegetables part of every meal, limiting treats, walking and playing, even shopping together. Making these efforts can help build healthy habits for a healthy weight for a lifetime.

Obesity experts stress that the key is to start somewhere. Even moderate improvements in diet and activity can add up to a healthier weight for your child. And when it comes to controlling weight, especially in youngsters, every pound counts.

If you're worried about your child's weight, talk to your pediatrician or healthcare provider. He or she will consider your child's growth history and where your child's weight is on the growth charts. This will help determine if your child's weight is in an unhealthy range.

Sources

<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/obesity/www.letsmove.gov>