

Childhood Obesity

Definition

Childhood obesity is a serious medical condition that affects children and adolescents. All children gain weight as they get older but extra pounds- more than what's needed to support their growth and development- can lead to childhood obesity. The condition is particularly troubling because the extra pounds often start kids on the path to health problems that were once confined to adults, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol.

The number of obese children has doubled in the last 30 years. Currently 5 million children ages 6 to 17 are obese. Obesity can emotionally affect children, possibly leading to low self-esteem and depression.

Diagnosis

As part of a regular well child visit the Dr. calculates your child's body mass index (BMI) and determines where it falls on the national BMI- for- age growth chart. The BMI indicates if your child is overweight for his or her age and height. Cut off points on these growth charts, established by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), help to identify overweight and obese children:

- BMI- for- age between 85th and 94th percentiles- overweight
- BMI- for- age 95th percentile or above- obesity

Because BMI doesn't consider things like being muscular or having a larger than average frame and because growth patterns vary greatly among children, your doctor also factors your child's growth and development into the overall weight assessment. This helps determine whether your child's weight is a health concern.

In addition to BMI and charting weight on the growth charts, the doctor also evaluates:

- Your family's history of obesity and weight- related health problems, such as diabetes
- Your child's eating habits and calorie intake
- Your child's activity level
- Other health conditions that your child might have

Risk factors

Many factors- usually working in combination- increase your child's risk of being overweight:

- **Diet.** Regular consumption of high-calorie foods, such as fast foods, baked goods and vending machine snacks, contribute to weight gain. High fat foods are dense

in calories. Loading up on soft drinks, candy and desserts also can lead to weight gain. Food and beverages like these are high in sugar and calories.

- **Inactivity.** Sedentary kids are more likely to gain weight because they don't burn calories through physical activity. Inactive leisure activities, such as watching TV or playing video games, contribute to the problem.
- **Genetics.** If your child comes from a family of overweight people, he or she may become genetically predisposed to put on excess weight, especially in an environment where high-calorie food is always available and physical activity isn't encouraged.
- **Psychological factors.** Some children overeat to cope with problems or to deal with emotions, such as stress or boredom.
- **Socioeconomic factors.** Children from low-income backgrounds are at a greater risk of becoming obese. Poverty and obesity go hand in hand because low-income parents may lack the time and resources to make healthy eating and exercise a family priority.

Complications

Obese children can develop serious health problems, such as diabetes and heart disease, often carrying these conditions into an obese adulthood. Overweight children are at higher risk of developing:

- Type 2 diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Asthma and other respiratory problems
- Sleep disorders
- Liver disease
- Eating disorders
- Skin infections

What you can do to help your child

There are many risk factors that contribute to obesity- including genetics, lack of physical activity, and poor eating habits. While you can't control genetics, it's important to encourage your child to adapt to these healthy lifestyle habits. Of course, it may be difficult at times to tear your child away from TV or video games. But, these tips can get you started on the right track:

- **Be supportive.** Let your child know that they are OK, no matter what their weight and that you are just trying to help. Provide unconditional love and support.
- **Talk about it.** Children are often more aware of their weight problems than you may think. Talk with them about their weight in a sympathetic, non-judgmental manner. Let them share their concerns with you, and encourage them to help develop a plan for healthier living.

- **Limit TV.** Set guidelines for the amount of TV the child can watch each day. Don't forget to limit the computer and video games.
- **Plan family activities.** Make activity a common part of your family's life. Instead of sitting on the sofa after dinner, take a stroll together or a bike ride around the neighborhood.
- **Assign chores.** Raking leaves, mowing the lawn, gardening, or vacuuming are all household chores that can really get children moving.
- **Get involved in active hobbies.** Ask children if they would enjoy participating in fun, structured activities such as tennis, football, soccer, dancing, or gymnastics.
- **Improve eating habits.** Be careful not to single out overweight children by placing only them on restrictive diets. Instead, improve the whole family's diet by increasing fruits, vegetables, and whole grains- and reducing fats and sweets. And don't use food as a reward or a punishment.
- **Eat meals together.** Try to make dinnertime a pleasant nightly occasion. Don't scold or argue- this may make children associate eating with stress or negative emotions.
- **Involve children.** Bring children grocery shopping , and ask them to help you prepare meals if they are old enough. These activities can teach children about nutrition and provide them with a sense of accomplishment.
- **Encourage slow eating.** It's easier to detect how hungry or full you are when you eat slowly.
- **Plan for healthy snacks.** Pick specific times throughout the day for snacking. Keep your kitchen stocked with fruits, vegetables, yogurt, frozen juice bars, crackers, and other wholesome snacks.
- **Control portion sizes.** If you serve your child large portions they may become used to eating large portions.
- **Limit sweetened beverages.** These drinks provide little nutritional value in exchange for their high calories. They may also make your child feel too full to eat healthier foods.
- **Limit the number of times you eat out.** Fast food restaurants are particularly high in fat and calories.
- **Try to include 30 minutes of exercise per day most days of the week.** There are many benefits to exercise.

Remember to include plenty of fruits and vegetables and whole grain products. This is where most of your child's calories should come from. These low-fat foods provide vitamins, minerals, complex carbohydrates and other substances that are good for your child's health.

Your child's diet also should include:

- High in fiber
- Low in fat and cholesterol
- Low to moderate in sugars and sodium

Exercise

Exercise should be an important part of any healthy weight loss plan. Try to have your child include at least 30 minutes of moderate activity most days of the week. Running in the yard, bike riding, going for a walk, and swimming are all great ways for your child to get moving.

There are many benefits to exercise. It reduces the risk of obesity, hypertension, and heart disease. It also increases longevity, and reduces feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress. With a regular exercise routine, most people see and feel results in about 4-6 weeks.

In Summary

Making lifestyle changes can be challenging. But if everyone works together and supports each other's efforts, you're more likely to succeed. Eventually healthy eating habits and exercise will become routine- and your child will be well on their way to treating childhood obesity and improving his/her health.