

Helping Your Overweight Child

U.S. Department of Health
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NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

NIDDK | NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
DIABETES AND DIGESTIVE
AND KIDNEY DISEASES

WIN Weight-control Information Network

Healthy eating and physical activity habits are key to your child's well-being. Eating too much and exercising too little may lead to overweight and related health problems that may follow children into their adult years. You can take an active role to help your child—and your whole family—learn healthy eating and physical activity habits that last a lifetime.

Is my child overweight?

Children grow at different rates at different times, so it is not always easy to tell if a child is overweight. If you think that your child is overweight, talk to your health care provider. He or she can tell you if your child's weight and height are in a healthy range.

How can I help my overweight child?

Involve the whole family in building healthy eating and physical activity habits. This benefits everyone and does not single out the child who is overweight.

Do not put your child on a weight-loss diet unless your health care provider tells you to. If children do not eat enough, they may not grow and learn as well as they should.

Be Supportive

- **Tell your child that he or she is loved, special, and important.** Children's feelings about themselves are often based on how they think their parents feel about them.
- **Accept your child at any weight.** Children are more likely to accept and feel good about themselves when their parents accept them.
- **Listen to your child's concerns about his or her weight.** Overweight children probably know better than anyone else that they have a weight problem. They need support, understanding, and encouragement from parents.



Encourage Healthy Eating Habits

- **Buy and serve more fruits and vegetables** (fresh, frozen, canned, or dried). Let your child choose them at the store.
- **Buy fewer soft drinks and high-fat or high-calorie snack foods** like chips, cookies, and candy. These snacks may be OK once in a while,

Healthy Snack Ideas

Your child might enjoy trying the following foods:

- Fresh fruit.
- Fruit canned in juice or light syrup.
- Small amounts of dried fruits, such as raisins, apple rings, or apricots.
- Fresh vegetables, such as baby carrots, cucumber, zucchini, or tomatoes.
- Low-sugar, whole-grain cereal with low-fat milk.

Foods that are small, round, sticky, or hard to chew, such as raisins, whole grapes, hard vegetables, hard chunks of cheese, nuts, seeds, and popcorn, can cause choking in children under age 4. You can still prepare some of these foods for young children, for example, by cutting grapes into small pieces and cooking and cutting up vegetables.

Always watch your toddler during meals and snacks.



but always keep healthy snack foods on hand. Offer the healthy snacks more often at snack times.

- **Make sure your child eats breakfast every day.** Breakfast may provide your child with the energy he or she needs to listen and learn in school. Skipping breakfast can leave your child hungry, tired, and looking for less healthy foods later in the day.
- **Eat fast food less often.** When you do visit a fast food restaurant, encourage your family to choose the healthier options, such as salads with low-fat dressing or small sandwiches without cheese or mayonnaise.
- **Offer your child water or low-fat milk more often than fruit juice.** Low-fat milk and milk products are important for your child's development. One hundred percent fruit juice is a healthy choice but is high in calories.
- **Limit the amount of saturated and *trans* fats in your family's diet.** Instead, obtain most of your fats from sources such as fish, vegetable oils, nuts, and seeds.
- **Plan healthy meals and eat together as a family.** Eating together at meal times helps children learn to enjoy a variety of foods.
- **Do not get discouraged if your child will not eat a new food the first time it is served.** Some kids will need to have a new food served to them 10 times or more before they will eat it.
- **Try not to use food as a reward when encouraging kids to eat.** Promising dessert to a child for eating vegetables, for example, sends the message that vegetables are less valuable than dessert. Kids learn to dislike foods they think are less valuable.



- **Start with small servings** and let your child ask for more if he or she is still hungry. It is up to you to provide your child with healthy meals and snacks, but your child should be allowed to choose how much food he or she will eat.

If you think that your child is overweight, talk to your health care provider. He or she can tell you if your child's weight and height are in a healthy range.

- **Encourage your child to join a sports team or class**, such as soccer, dance, basketball, or gymnastics at school or at your local community or recreation center.

- **Be aware that some high-fat or high-sugar foods and beverages may be strongly marketed to kids.** Usually these products are associated with cartoon characters, offer free toys, and come in bright packages. Talk with your child about the importance of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and other healthy foods—even if these foods are not often advertised on TV or in stores.

- **Be sensitive to your child's needs.** If your child feels uncomfortable participating in activities like sports, help him or her find physical activities that are fun and not embarrassing, such as playing tag with friends or siblings, jumping rope, or dancing to his or her favorite music.
- **Be active together as a family.** Assign active chores such as making the beds, washing the car, or vacuuming. Plan active outings such as a trip to the zoo, a family bike ride, or a walk through a local park.

Encourage Daily Physical Activity

Like adults, kids need daily physical activity. Here are some ways to help your child move every day:

- **Set a good example.** If your child sees that you are physically active and that you have fun doing it, he or she is more likely to be active throughout life.

A pre-adolescent child's body is not ready for adult-style physical activity. Do not encourage your child to participate in activities such as long jogs, using an exercise bike or treadmill, or lifting heavy weights. **FUN** physical activities that kids choose to do on their own are often best.



FUN Physical Activity Ideas

Your child might enjoy trying the following physical activities:

- Riding a bike.
- Climbing on a jungle gym.
- Jumping rope.
- Playing hopscotch.
- Bouncing a ball.
- Dancing.
- Playing catch.



Kids need about 60 minutes of physical activity a day, but this does not have to happen all at once. Several short 10- or even 5-minute periods of activity throughout the day are just as good. If your children are not used to being active, encourage them to start with what they can do and build up to 60 minutes a day.

Discourage Inactive Pastimes

- **Set limits on the amount of time** your family spends watching TV, playing video games, and being on the computer.
- **Help your child find FUN things to do** besides watching TV, like acting out favorite books or stories, or doing a family art project. Your child may find that creative play is more interesting than TV.

- **Encourage your child to get up and move** during commercials and discourage snacking when the TV is on.

Be a Positive Role Model

Children are good learners and they often mimic what they see. Choose healthy foods and active pastimes for yourself. Your children will learn to follow healthy habits that last a lifetime.

Find More Help

Your Health Care Provider

Ask your health care provider for brochures, booklets, or other information about healthy eating, physical activity, and weight control. He or she may be able to refer you to other health care professionals who work with overweight children, such as registered dietitians, psychologists, and exercise physiologists.

Weight-control Program

You may want to think about a treatment program if:

- You have changed your family's eating and physical activity habits and your child has not reached a healthy weight.
- Your health care provider has told you that your child's health or emotional well-being is at risk because of his or her weight.

The overall goal of a treatment program should be to help your whole family adopt healthy eating and physical activity habits that you can keep up for the rest of your lives. Here are some other things a weight-control program should do:

- Include a variety of health care professionals on staff, including doctors, registered dietitians, psychiatrists or psychologists, and exercise physiologists.



- Evaluate your child’s weight, growth, and health before enrolling him or her in the program. The program should also monitor these factors while your child is enrolled.
- Adapt to the specific age and abilities of your child. Programs for 4-year-olds should be different from those for 12-year-olds.
- Help your family keep up healthy eating and physical activity behaviors after the program ends.

Additional Reading From the Weight-control Information Network

Helping Your Child: Tips for Parents is a brochure that provides parents with in-depth information about healthy eating and physical activity for children.

1-877-946-4627 or <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/child.htm>

This brochure is also available in Spanish.

http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/su_hijo.htm

Other Resources

BAM! Body and Mind answers kids’ questions about health, including physical activity and nutrition. It also offers a “Teacher’s Corner” for educators.
<http://www.bam.gov>

Fruits and Veggies—More Matters is a joint initiative from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Produce for Better Health Foundation to encourage Americans to eat more fruits and vegetables. The initiative’s website offers nutritional information, recipes, and tips.
<http://www.fruitsandveggiesmatter.gov>

KidsHealth offers nutrition and fitness information for kids.
<http://www.kidshealth.org>

Kidnetic provides tips on healthy eating and physical activity for kids and parents.
<http://www.kidnetic.com>

MyPyramid is an interactive tool that replaces the Food Guide Pyramid. The MyPyramid website offers information to help you make healthier food choices and find your balance between food and physical activity. The website also has materials just for kids.
<http://www.mypyramid.gov>

National Diabetes Education Program provides information about diabetes and children to parents and health care professionals.
www.ndep.nih.gov/diabetes/youth/youth.htm

Verb is a website that encourages kids to be physically active.
<http://www.verbnow.com>

WeCan! Ways to Enhance Children's Activity and Nutrition is a national program designed for families and communities to help children maintain a healthy weight.

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/wecan/index.htm>

Weight-control Information Network

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Publications produced by WIN are reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts. This fact sheet was also reviewed by Leonard Epstein, Ph.D., Professor of Pediatrics, Social and Preventive Medicine, and Psychology, University of Buffalo School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, and Gladys Gary Vaughn, Ph.D., National Program Leader, Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Services, U.S. Department of Agriculture.