



KJARTAN D. ARMANN, M.D.
Infant, Child and Adolescent Medicine

2516 Samaritan Dr., Suite J
San Jose, CA 95124
Phone: (408) 356-0578
Fax: (408) 353-986
www.kjkidmd.com

Childhood obesity

Childhood obesity is a serious medical condition that affects children and adolescents. It occurs when a child is well above the normal weight for his or her age and height. Childhood obesity is particularly troubling because the extra pounds often start children on the path to health problems that were once confined to adults, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Childhood obesity can also lead to poor self-esteem and depression.

One of the best strategies to reduce childhood obesity is to improve the diet and exercise habits of your entire family. Treating and preventing childhood obesity helps protect the health of your child now and in the future.

Not all children carrying extra pounds are overweight or obese. Some children have larger than average body frames. And children normally carry different amounts of body fat at the various stages of development. So you might not know just by looking at your child if his or her weight is a health concern.

Your child's doctor can help you figure out if your child's weight could pose health problems, using growth charts and if necessary, other tests.

When to see a doctor

If you're worried that your child is putting on too much weight, talk to his or her doctor or health care provider. He or she will consider your child's individual history of growth and development, your family's weight-for-height history, and where your child lands on the growth charts. This can help determine if your child's weight is in an unhealthy range.

Although there are some genetic and hormonal causes of childhood obesity, most of the time it's caused by kids eating too much and exercising too little.

Risk factors

Many factors — usually working in combination — increase your child's risk of becoming overweight:

- **Diet.** Regularly eating high-calorie foods, such as fast foods, baked goods and vending machine snacks, can easily cause your child to gain weight. Loading up on soft drinks containing sugar, candy and desserts also can cause weight gain. Foods and beverages like these are high in sugar, fat and calories.
- **Lack of exercise.** Children who don't exercise much are more likely to gain weight because they don't burn calories through physical activity. Inactive leisure activities, such as watching television or playing video games, contribute to the problem.
- **Family history.** If your child comes from a family of overweight people, he or she may be more likely 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 to fight boredom. Their parents may have similar tendencies.
- **Family factors.** If many of the groceries you buy are convenience foods, such as cookies, chips and other high-calorie items, this can contribute to your child's weight gain. If you can control your child's access to high-calorie foods, you may be able to help your child lose weight.
- **Socioeconomic factors.** Foods that won't spoil quickly, such as frozen meals, crackers and cookies often contain a lot of salt and fats. These foods are often less expensive or an easier option than fresher, healthier foods.

Childhood obesity can have complications for the physical, social and emotional well-being of your child.



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Physical complications

- **Type 2 diabetes.** Type 2 diabetes in children is a chronic condition that affects the way your child's body metabolizes sugar (glucose). Type 2 diabetes is caused in part by a poor diet, and can often be reversed by eating healthier foods and exercising.
- **Metabolic syndrome.** Metabolic syndrome isn't a disease itself, but a cluster of conditions that can put your child at risk of developing heart disease, diabetes or other health problems. This cluster of conditions includes high blood pressure, high blood sugar, high cholesterol and excess abdominal fat.
- **High cholesterol and high blood pressure.** Your child can develop high blood pressure or high cholesterol if he or she eats a poor diet. These factors can contribute to the buildup of plaques in the arteries. These plaques can cause arteries to narrow and harden, which can lead to a heart attack or stroke later in life.
- **Asthma and other breathing problems.** The extra weight on your child's body can cause problems with the development and health of your child's lungs, leading to asthma or other breathing problems.
- **Sleep disorders.** Sleep apnea, a condition in which your child may snore or have abnormal breathing when he or she sleeps, can be a complication of childhood obesity. Pay attention to breathing problems your child may have while sleeping.
- **Early puberty or menstruation.** Being obese can create hormone imbalances for your child. These imbalances can cause puberty to start earlier than expected.

Treatments

Treatment for childhood obesity is based on your child's age and if he or she has other medical conditions. Treatment usually includes changes in your child's diet and level of physical activity. In certain circumstances, treatment may include medications or weight-loss surgery.

Treatment for children under age 7

For children under age 7 who have no other health concerns, the goal of treatment may be weight maintenance rather than weight loss. This strategy allows the child to add inches in height but not pounds, causing BMI-for-age to drop over time into a healthier range. However, for an obese child, maintaining weight while waiting to grow taller may be as difficult as losing weight is for older people.

Treatment for children 7 years of age and older

Weight loss is typically recommended for children older than age 7 or for younger children who have related health concerns. Weight loss should be slow and steady — anywhere from 1 pound (about 0.5 kilograms) a week to 1 pound a month, depending on your child's condition.

The methods for maintaining your child's current weight or losing weight are the same: Your child needs to eat a healthy diet and increase his or her physical activity. Success depends largely on your commitment to helping your child make these changes. Think of eating habits and exercise habits as two sides of the same coin: When you consider one, you also need to consider the other.

Healthy eating

Parents are the ones who buy the food, cook the food and decide where the food is eaten. Even small changes can make a big difference in your child's health.

Physical activity

A critical part of weight loss, especially for children, is physical activity. It not only burns calories but also builds strong bones and muscles and helps children sleep well at night and stay alert during the day. Such habits established in



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childhood help adolescents maintain healthy weight despite the hormonal changes, rapid growth and social influences that often lead to overeating. And active children are more likely to become fit adults.

To increase your child's activity level:

- **Limit recreational computer and TV time to no more than 2 hours a day.** A surefire way to increase your child's activity levels is to limit the number of hours he or she is allowed to watch television each day. Other sedentary activities — playing video and computer games or talking on the phone — also should be limited. Don't let your child eat while viewing an electronic screen; it keeps your child from being aware of how much he or she is eating.
- **Emphasize activity, not exercise.** Your child's activity doesn't have to be a structured exercise program — the object is just to get him or her moving. Free-play activities, such as playing hide-and-seek, tag or jump-rope, can be great for burning calories and improving fitness.
- **Find activities your child likes to do.** For instance, if your child is artistically inclined, go on a nature hike to collect leaves and rocks that your child can use to make a collage. If your child likes to climb, head for the nearest neighborhood jungle gym or climbing wall. If your child likes to read, then walk or bike to the neighborhood library for a book.
- **If you want an active child, be active yourself.** Find fun activities that the whole family can do together. Never make exercise seem a punishment or a chore.
- **Vary the activities.** Let each child take a turn choosing the activity of the day or week. Batting practice, bowling and swimming all count. What matters is that you're doing something active.

Prevention

Whether your child is at risk of becoming overweight or currently at a healthy weight, you can take proactive measures to get or keep things on the right track.

- **Schedule yearly well-child visits.** Take your child to the doctor for well-child checkups at least once a year. During this visit, the doctor measures your child's height and weight and calculates his or her BMI. Increases in your child's BMI or in his or her percentile rank over one year, especially if your child is older than 4, is a possible sign that your child is at risk of becoming overweight.
- **Set a good example.** Make sure you eat healthy foods and exercise regularly to maintain your weight. Then, invite your child to join you.
- **Avoid food-related power struggles with your child.** You might unintentionally lay the groundwork for such battles by providing or withholding certain foods — sweets, for instance — as rewards or punishments. As a general rule, don't use food as a reward or punishment.
- **Emphasize the positive.** Encourage a healthy lifestyle by highlighting the positive — the fun of playing outside or the variety of fresh fruit you can get year-round, for example. Emphasize the benefits of exercise apart from helping to manage weight. For example, it makes the heart, lungs and other muscles stronger. If you foster your child's natural inclination to run around, explore and eat only when hungry — not out of boredom — a healthy weight should take care of itself.
- **Be patient.** Many overweight children grow into their extra pounds as they get taller. Realize, too, that an intense focus on your child's eating habits and weight can easily backfire, leading a child to overeat even more, or possibly making him or her more prone to developing an eating disorder.
- **Be responsible about your own weight.** Obesity often occurs in several family members. If you need to lose weight, doing so will motivate your child to do likewise. Don't expect your child to do something you are unwilling to do for yourself.