



Children and Obesity: Good Food and Good Moves

Children throughout the U.S. are gaining weight and becoming less fit, with potentially dangerous long-term consequences. The good news is parents can reverse this trend.

The number of overweight children ages 6-19 has more than tripled since 1980. In that age group, 16 percent (over 9 million young people) are considered overweight. Overweight children can develop diabetes and early risk factors for heart disease. Being overweight also carries emotional risks for children. By the age of six, many children have developed negative attitudes about obesity and will exclude overweight children from play. Overweight children are teased and ridiculed by their peers. In adolescence, many overweight young people have developed a negative self-image that may continue into adulthood.

Overweight adolescents usually carry their excess weight into adulthood. Overweight in adults is linked to diabetes, coronary heart disease, atherosclerosis and some forms of cancer.

Lifestyle changes are to blame

What happened in the last 25 years to have caused such a dramatic increase in childhood obesity? Genetics, overeating and lack of physical activity can all contribute to obesity. Because human genetic factors do not change this rapidly in a general population, experts attribute the alarming rise in child obesity to lifestyle factors: the way today's children eat and their lack of exercise.

Fortunately, parents and children can reverse this trend by making changes in the way they eat and live. By making these changes gradually and making them fun, children will not feel deprived and different from their peers. They'll be more likely to stick to their healthier habits as they grow to adulthood and become parents themselves.

Looking for quick ways to feed their families, busy families often turn to fast foods. Unfortunately fast food meals can be high in fat and sugar. Children who regularly eat fast food meals and high-fat, high-sugar snacks tend to get fatter, especially if they don't get plenty of exercise each day.

What's more, a fast-food diet puts them at risk for nutritional deficiencies that may contribute to lack of energy, mood swings, sleep difficulties, poor school performance and more illnesses.

Children are also gaining weight because they play, exercise and do much less physical work than they used to. The average American child spends 24 hours each week watching TV. This doesn't include the time they spend playing video games, watching movies or working at the computer. Children often gobble high calorie snacks mindlessly while watching TV. It all adds up to heavier children and teens.

Make sure it's overweight

If you think your child is overweight, you and your child can take steps to help him or her trim down. Because children tend to grow unevenly — they gain weight and then grow into it, or gain height and then put on the weight that goes with that height— talk to your child's health care provider to make sure you child really is overweight. Discuss your plans to improve your entire family's diet and increase your activity levels.

Then make plans to switch gradually to healthier foods and to become more active as a family. If you want a fat child to become more active and eat better, make sure the entire family moves in the same direction. This prevents the overweight child from feeling singled out and reinforces the importance of good eating and exercise habits for everyone.

By modeling healthy habits themselves, parents set powerful examples for their children. Children whose parents are overweight are more likely to become overweight adults themselves.

Replace, don't limit

Don't limit the *amount* of food your child eats. Limiting food can stunt growth, lead to eating disorders and cause many health problems including lower bone density; it may cause your child to sneak or beg for food. Limiting how much he or she can eat will feel like deprivation. You want to help your child focus on increasing energy, strength, self-confidence, self-caring and choice.

Instead of limiting food, you can replace calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods with healthier choices. Make the choosing fun. Let older children make a long list of their favorite foods, research which ones are healthiest and focus on creating most meals and snack foods from the healthier list. Increase the servings of fruits and vegetables (not including potatoes) you and your children eat each day.

With your children's input, make the substitutions gradually. Some suggestions for getting started in the snack department include replacing a roll of fruit leather with a handful of dried fruit, a bag of potato chips with handful of peanuts in the shell, an ice cream bar with half a frozen banana on a stick or a handful of frozen grapes or strawberries, a candy bar with a piece of fruit.

Keep healthier food choices visible: a bowl of fresh fruit on the TV table, raw vegetables and a bowl of spicy salsa dip in the fridge. Instead of eating chips straight from a supersized bag while watching TV, serve them in individual small bags, or take out a few, put them on a plate, and put the bag away.

Better yet, consider setting a rule of no eating while watching TV or sitting at the computer. Research shows that people eat less and learn to enjoy food more when they eat in an attractive, calm and unhurried environment and focus on eating.

Make trips to your favorite fast food restaurant less often. If you do go, try to keep the portion sizes moderate. Super sizes may be a good deal for your wallet, but they aren't for your (or your children's) health. Stay away from buffets and all-you-can-eat specials.

Move more

Increasing their physical activity and making healthier food choices is the most efficient and healthy way to help children lose fat or keep from getting fat in the first place. Children need at least 60 minutes of

vigorous activity each day. Long, continuous stretches of active play offer the most benefits, although 10 or 15-minute blocks of vigorous physical activity throughout the day will also improve health and fitness.

Help children be more active by making exercise fun. Like adults, children will not stay with an activity they don't enjoy. Make sure to include your children in the decisions to make changes. If they feel like a part of the process, they'll be more likely to participate and stay active.

Add physical activity to the day in many ways: encourage children to take the stairs rather than the elevator or escalator. Park further away from stores, banks or the dentist's office, rather than as close to the door as possible. Suggest walking back and forth the entire length of the mall three times before visiting any stores. Whenever possible, refuse to drive children to the store, the library or a friend's house to play—if it's safe, have them walk or ride their bikes.

Our busy lifestyles focus on ways to save time. But many families improve their health and fitness by making daily life more physically *inefficient*. They keep their refrigerator in the basement, for instance, so people have to go up and down stairs for a snack or a cold drink. They put up a laundry line and hang the wash whenever possible. They plant a salad garden in the back yard and choose a push model instead of a riding tractor to mow the lawn. If possible, they walk or ride their bikes when visiting the library or video store, mailing letters at the post office or keeping a dentist appointment.

Ask your children to help you plan family activities that get everyone moving: walks hikes, bike rides, swims. Buy a canoe and learn to paddle. Post a big map on the living room wall and plan a walking/running or biking trip across New Hampshire (or the entire United State, China, Europe, or India.) Learn about the places you plan to "visit." Then mark the miles your family covers each week with a magic marker and celebrate with a special activity when you complete the "trip."

Limit time in front of the TV and computer (or buy and try out some exercise videos, or young children's exercise audiotapes or CDs). Take a family walk after dinner rather than (or before) turning on the TV. Discover old-fashioned active games like tag, hopscotch and jump rope. Set up a volleyball or badminton court in the back yard. Shoot baskets, toss a ball back and forth, play Frisbee. Count how many times in a row you can catch the ball or Frisbee without dropping or missing it. Challenge your children by creating a simple obstacle course with boxes to crawl through, things to jump or climb over and places to perform crunches, push-ups and bar-hangs. Hang knotted climbing ropes from a tree branch or build a jungle gym.

When adding physical activity to your family's life, be sensitive to your children's needs by choosing activities they can do that aren't too difficult, awkward or embarrassing. Have children build confidence by taking lessons to improve skills like swimming, bike riding and swinging a racquet or bat. Learn the facts about preventing injury and staying limber (stretching). Encourage everyone to drink several glasses or bottles of plain water every day.

Instead of focusing on "losing weight," simply pay attention to increasing physical activity and improving food choices. Your children will get fitter and healthier. They will lose weight and keep it off in the process. Habits they develop now can last a lifetime.

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