



September: Childhood Obesity

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) childhood obesity has more than tripled in the past 30 years. Obesity occurs mostly because of a caloric imbalance, meaning too many calories are being eaten and not enough are being used through physical activity. Physical activity and food choices are the most important factors in weight gain and loss but other factors including genetics and family and social influences also play a role. Childhood obesity has both immediate and long-term health impacts:

- Obese youth are more likely to have risk factors for cardiovascular disease, such as high cholesterol or high blood pressure. In a population based sample of 5 to 17 year olds, 70% of obese youth had at least one risk factor for cardiovascular disease.
- Children and adolescents who are obese are at greater risk for bone and joint problems, sleep apnea, and social and psychological problems such as poor self-esteem.
- Obese youth are more likely than youth of normal weight to become overweight or obese adults, and therefore more at risk for associated adult health problems, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, several types of cancer and osteoarthritis.

How to Keep your Child at a Healthy Weight

First, have doctor evaluate your child's weight using tools such as body mass index (BMI) and growth charts, and considering age, sex, maturity level, ethnicity and physical activity. Remember, no one has a specific ideal weight; we all have a range of acceptable weight.

Weight management: Unless a child is severely overweight a weight management program should not focus on weight loss. Instead, focus on keeping the weight stable as the child grows, getting taller and more muscular over time, allowing them to grow into their weight. Programs should be built on the foundations of a healthy diet and physical activity.

- Experts recommend that most children get at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity daily.

Become a positive influence for your child: Adopt healthy eating habits and begin exercising with your child. When the whole family participates in the lifestyle changes

overweight children have a better chance of success and will not feel singled out; creating a stronger family bond over healthy activities.

Tips to follow for a healthy lifestyle:

- Buy birthday and holiday presents that promote movement, such as roller skates, frisbees, a croquet set or sports equipment.
- Find activities in your community, such as hiking trails, swimming pools, skating rinks, etc.
- Emphasize having fun, not skill.
- Combine “new” foods with “favorite” foods: mix bran cereal with the fun cereal your kids are used to; serve low-fat ice cream with fresh fruit on top.
- Drink water instead of soda, fruit drinks and sports drinks.
- Eat meals together so you can be a role model. Make meals a pleasant time to discuss your day, not time for lecturing or punishing.
- Do not eat in front of the television.
- Involve kids in planning, shopping, and preparing meals, snacks and school lunches using the Food Pyramid as a guide. Research shows that kids usually eat the dishes they fix.
- Do not use food as a punishment or reward.
- Help your child consider healthy choices in place they eat, such as the school cafeteria or fast food restaurants.
- Choose smaller sizes, share side orders or set aside half of the portion for another meal.

Studies have shown that children who make small, progressive modifications in behavior are able to build on their achievements and make permanent changes. Helping children set small wellness goals, participating with them and holding them accountable will aid their new healthy lifestyle. Remember that when setting goals they must be SMART goals.

- **Specific:** What is your goal, why is this your goal, how and when will you achieve it.
- **Measurable:** If you can't manage it, you can't measure it.
- **Attainable:** An attainable goal will only slightly stretch you. If goals are set too far out of reach you will be less likely to even try.
- **Realistic:** Goals should be do-able. If sweets are eaten everyday a goal of never eating sweets again would be unrealistic. Replacing sweets with fruit 3 times a week may be more realistic.
- **Timely:** Set a timeframe for the goal; by April or by fifth grade. Putting an end point on the goal gives a clear target to work towards.

Setting a goal to “eat healthy” is not specific enough and may seem overwhelming. Instead pick one topic to focus on, such as eating 3 servings of vegetables a day. Once you and your child have achieved and adapted to this goal, have them pick a new one like replacing water with soda 3 days a week. The same can be done with physical activity goals.

Information gathered from the Centers for Disease Control:

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

