

Overweight children - healthy lifestyle tips

Children who are overweight or obese can benefit from healthy eating and regular physical activity (exercise). Childhood is an important opportunity to develop healthy patterns for life and prevent weight problems. Professional advice from a doctor or dietitian can help your child reach and maintain a healthy weight.

The number of overweight children is increasing. About one-quarter of children in Australia are now overweight or obese. Research shows that overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults.

Encouraging your child to eat healthy food and be physically active is important for their healthy future. It can be a challenge and requires patience, positivity, practice and time.

Seek advice if you're not sure

Children have different body shapes at different ages, so it can be difficult to tell if a child is overweight. As the number of overweight children in Australia increases, our view of what is 'normal' can change. Your family doctor, school nurse or an experienced health professional will be able to give you feedback on your child's growth.

Why children become overweight

Children become overweight when the energy they 'take in' (through food and drink) is greater than the energy they 'put out' (through physical activity and exercise). A diet high in energy and fat, combined with low levels of physical activity and exercise, will lead to a person becoming overweight.

Children inherit body type and shape from their parents. You cannot change these factors but you can influence your child's eating habits and activity patterns, which will also affect their body weight.

Possible problems for overweight children

Overweight children can face many difficulties. They may feel different from other children, which can affect their confidence. They can also be subjected to bullying from other children. This may make parents feel worried about their child taking part in everyday activity such as school sports. Unfortunately, this cycle can make weight control more difficult.

Although health problems are less common in childhood, children who continue to be overweight into adulthood are at greater risk of developing:

- High blood fats and heart disease
- Type 2 diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Stroke
- Joint problems
- Breathing problems
- Some forms of cancer.

It is rare for a medical condition to cause a child to become overweight, but always check with your doctor if you are concerned.

How to help your overweight child

If your child is overweight, it is important to seek the advice of a health professional. Young children should not be on diets that severely limit food intake. You may be advised to make permanent changes to your family's lifestyle and eating patterns. Everyone at home should be involved in these changes, regardless of body weight, so that no child feels singled out. Making the right changes will protect your children from developing eating and dieting problems later in life.

It may take a number of attempts before children are happy to change their food choices or become more active. This can be frustrating for parents who have their children's best interests at heart. Don't give up. Remember to stay positive. Children who are overweight need to know that they are loved and important, regardless of their weight.

How to make healthy food choices

A healthy diet is not only the **type** of food your child eats but also the **amount** of food they eat. All children should eat regularly, including healthy snacks.

Good nutrition starts early in life. Wherever possible try to:

- Breastfeed.
- Introduce solids at around six months.
- Encourage a wide variety of nutritious foods. No particular food should be forced or overly restricted.
- Consider using reduced fat dairy products after two years of age.
- Offer mostly cereals, grains and breads, vegetables and fruits with moderate amounts of meat products and dairy foods.
- Use added fats (such as oil, margarine and butter) in small amounts.
- Offer fresh vegetables and fruit instead of processed snack foods.
- Include small amounts of treats such as cakes, chips or takeaway foods occasionally (once or twice per week). Enjoy them as a family.
- Offer children water when they are thirsty. Sweet drinks including juice, cordial and soft drinks are not necessary and can contribute to tooth decay.

Ways to encourage healthy changes to your child's eating

Suggestions include:

- Buy, prepare and offer the foods you would like your child to eat. Allow them to choose what and how much of these foods they will eat.
- Keep offering healthy foods even if they are refused at first.
- Include your child's food choices in the family menu sometimes.
- Act as a role model. Make sure your child sees you eating healthy foods.
- Involve children in simple food preparation such as making a salad.
- Let your child decide if they have had enough, even if food is left on their plate. This encourages children to better understand feelings of hunger and fullness. These habits may help to control appetite and prevent overeating as they grow.
- Encourage slow eating if yours is a family of fast eaters. Put your knife and fork down between mouthfuls. Offer crunchy foods that need lots of chewing.
- Help your child recognise if he or she eats when bored, sad or lonely. Try to suggest another activity to help distract them.
- Try not to punish, reward or cheer your child up with food. It can be tempting to use food this way sometimes, but it establishes an unhealthy relationship with food.

Fun family activity

An active lifestyle is important for the whole family, regardless of their age or weight. Physical activity helps to build skills, makes you feel better and helps to protect you from many lifestyle diseases.

Activity should be fun, without focusing only on competition or skills. To keep children active as they get older, they may need help from their parents to include physical activity in the family routine.

Tips to increase everyday activity at home

Suggestions include:

- Be active together. Let your child see you being active too.
- Encourage lots of free playtime outside.
- Try to use the car less. Walk or cycle to school, the shops or to a friend's house.
- Help your child find a balance between organised sport, fun activities and individual sports like swimming and dancing.
- Find an activity that your child enjoys and that is fun, readily available, affordable and matches your child's age and skill level. Ask your child's physical education teacher, childcare worker, community centre or other parents about options.
- Be supportive and encouraging. Some children feel embarrassed and uncomfortable about their physical skills or appearance.
- Motivate your children to be active – even though it's not always easy. Remember, if your child gets hot, puffed and sweaty when active, this is generally a good sign that they are working their bodies and getting some benefit from the exercise.

Television and screen viewing

Watching too much television is linked closely with overweight in children. When children watch TV, they are not being active. They are also more likely to see food advertisements that encourage them to eat, whether they are hungry or not. Suggestions include:

- Limit sedentary activity like TV viewing, watching videos, playing personal screen games and using computers. These activities should total no more than two hours a day for children five years and older and, no more than one hour per day for children aged two to five years.
- Avoid eating while the TV is on. This may be a distraction from family time together.

Getting started

Start slowly. It is best to manage one or two small changes before moving on to the next change. Find out what works for your family – everyone is different. Small setbacks may happen, but try to be patient and reward your child's effort and progress with treats like books, stickers or special outings.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- School nurse
- Maternal and child health nurse
- An Accredited Practising Dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia
- Physical education teacher
- Childcare worker
- Local community centre

Things to remember

- Involve the whole family in healthy eating and activity.
- Encourage active play and sport.
- Limit sedentary activities such as TV, screen games and computers to no more than one hour a day.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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