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- [Site Navigation](#)
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[Menu](#)

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## Navigation

[Home](#) [Close Menu](#)

- - [Conversation-Going-travelling](#)
- [Conditions and treatments](#)
  - [Conditions and treatments](#)
    - [Allergies](#)
      - [Allergies](#)
        - [Allergic reaction to packaged food](#)
    - [Anxiety](#)
    - [Arthritis](#)
    - [Asthma](#)
    - [Behavioural conditions](#)
    - [Birth defects](#)
    - [Blood and blood vessels](#)
    - [Bones muscles and joints](#)
      - [Bones muscles and joints](#)
        - [Foot care - podiatrists](#)
    - [Brain and nerves](#)
    - [Cancer](#)
    - [Complementary and alternative care](#)
    - [Dementia](#)
  - [Healthy living](#)
    - [Healthy living](#)
      - [Alcohol](#)
      - [Babies and toddlers \(0-3\)](#)
      - [Children \(4-12\)](#)
      - [Drugs and addictive behaviours](#)

- [Environmental health](#)
- [Family Violence](#)
- [Older people in hospital – Get well soon](#)
- [Health checks](#)
- [Healthy Eating](#)
  - [Nutrition for life](#)
- [Healthy mind](#)
- [Healthy pregnancy](#)
- [Immunisation](#)
- [Services and support](#)
  - [Services and support](#)
  - [Aged care services](#)
  - [Alcohol and drug services](#)
  - [LGBTI support](#)
  - [Carers, caring and respite care services](#)
  - [Child, family and relationship services](#)
  - [Disability services](#)
  - [Emergency, crisis and support services](#)
  - [End of life and palliative care services](#)
  - [Hospitals, surgery and procedures](#)
  - [Mental health services](#)
  - [Planning and coordinating healthcare](#)
  - [Pregnancy and birth services](#)
- [A-Z](#)
  - [A-Z](#)
  - [Conditions and treatments](#)
  - [Healthy living](#)
  - [Services and support](#)
  - [Videos](#)
  - [Service profiles](#)
- [Blog](#)
  - [Blog](#)
  - [Blog authors](#)
  - [Topics](#)
- [Podcast](#)
  - [Podcast](#)
  - [Influenza - Dr Brett Sutton & Prof Kanta Subbarao](#)
  - [Trauma - Anne Leadbeater OAM & Dr Rob Gordon](#)
  - [template](#)
- [Other sites](#)
  -  [Health.vic](#)  [DHHS](#)  [Seniors Online](#)
- [Sitemap](#)
- [My Health Life](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Googleplus](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Youtube](#)
- [Rss](#)
- [Conditions and treatments](#)
- [Healthy living](#)
- [Services and support](#)
- [A-Z](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Podcast](#)



[Back to Children \(4-12\)](#)

- [Home](#)
- [Healthy living](#)
- [Children \(4-12\)](#)
- Growth and development - primary school children

## Growth and development - primary school children

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- [Children \(4-12\)](#)
- [Children \(4-12\) - Growth and development](#)

## Summary

- Parents and carers are the main role models for children (of all ages), despite the powerful influences of peers and the media.
- Primary school children pick up the media messages surrounding body image and are thinking about how they look.
- Being underweight or overweight can cause health problems in the long term.

The easiest way to measure a primary school child's growth is by plotting their weight and height over a period of time on growth reference charts. Healthy children will generally have healthy growth and development patterns.

Many things influence growth including genes, nutrition, good health and sickness. Children do not usually grow in a constant way. They usually grow in 'bursts'. A change in height and weight can occur in a short amount of time. Children's growth during the primary years is slow and steady.

## How children's growth is measured

Doctors, nurses and other health professionals use a variety of ways to assess growth in primary school children. The most common ways include:

- **Growth charts** – standard growth references or growth charts are used to help interpret the child's height and weight measurements.
- **Body Mass Index (BMI)** – a calculation of BMI and use of age-specific BMI charts gives an indication of weight-for-height ratio.

## Growth charts in Australia

Growth charts are used to measure children's growth. Measurements are taken from studies of the population as a whole and reflect the normal range of height and weight for children within a particular group (for example, all children born in a particular year).

The charts are divided into sections, called 'centiles', which show the proportion of the group that is above or below a particular measurement. For example, a child who is on the 85th centile for height is taller than 85 per cent of other children in Australia (of the same age and gender) but shorter than 15 per cent of other children.

In Victoria, the Centre for Disease Control growth charts from the United States are most commonly used to assess and monitor the growth of children. The World Health Organisation growth charts may also be used in some settings.

## BMI centile charts for children

The BMI, is the most common way to assess whether a person is underweight, healthy weight or overweight. The BMI is a number that interprets a person's weight in relation to their height. It is calculated by dividing a person's weight in kilograms by their height in metres squared.

$$\text{BMI} = \text{Weight (kg)} / \text{Height (m)}^2$$

As children grow, their amount of body fat changes and so will their BMI. For example, BMI usually drops during the preschool years and then increases through the school years into adulthood. So a BMI calculation for a child (or for an adolescent) must be looked at together with age and gender centile charts.

BMI centile charts are used for children over the age of two. The charts use centile cut-offs as a guide only. BMI above the 85<sup>th</sup> centile and below the 95<sup>th</sup> centile indicates a child is overweight. The 95<sup>th</sup> centile and above indicates obesity.

## Weight problems in childhood can cause problems

Being underweight or overweight can cause problems both now and when your child is an adult. For example:

- Severely restricting food or dieting before puberty can stunt a child's growth.
- Overweight children may be teased in the schoolyard, which may make them self-conscious and affect their attitude to school.
- Overweight children are less likely to take part in physical activity, which can make it even harder for them to manage their weight.
- Childhood obesity can increase the risk of a child developing a range of illnesses in later life such as diabetes and heart disease.

Some primary school children believe they are either too fat or too thin (skinny), even if they are within the healthy weight range for their height and age. At this stage, primary school aged children become aware of how they look compared with other children, and have begun to notice the media messages surrounding body image.

How parents react to their child's body image issues is very important. Parents and carers are the main role models for children (of all ages), despite the powerful influences of peers and the media.

Try to be a good role model and establish healthy eating habits for yourself and the whole family. Don't 'crash diet' or skip meals yourself and talk to your children about the importance of healthy eating habits for everyone. Try to involve your children in physical activities they enjoy – perhaps do things together as a family, like walking or bike riding. This is the perfect time for your child to learn about the importance of healthy food and activity.

## See your doctor if you are worried

Always see your doctor if you are concerned about your child's growth. Your doctor can use a range of charts to help assess whether or not your child's growth is of concern.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
- Nurse-on-call Tel. 1300 60 60 24 (24 hours, 7 days)
- Primary School Nursing Program, Office for Children and Early Childhood Development Tel. (03) 9096 8653
- The Royal Children's Hospital Tel. (03) 9345 5522

## Things to remember

- Parents and carers are the main role models for children (of all ages), despite the powerful influences of peers and the media.
- Primary school children pick up the media messages surrounding body image and are thinking about how they look.
- Being underweight or overweight can cause health problems in the long term.

### References

- *Weight – how much should you weigh?*, Child and Youth Health SA. [More information here.](#)
- *Eating disorders and stunted growth*, Child and Youth Health SA. [More information here.](#)
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- *Child growth standards charts*, Multicentre Growth Reference Study (MGRS), World Health Organization (WHO). [More information here.](#)
- *Growth charts*, Raising Children Network, The Australian Parenting Website. [More information here.](#)
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- *Child Growth Charts*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, USA [More information here.](#)

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- [Children basics](#)
- [Growth and development](#)
- [Behaviour and learning](#)
- [Healthy eating](#)
- [Keeping active](#)
- [Managing weight](#)
- [Care and wellbeing](#)
- [Identity and relationships](#)
- [Health conditions and complaints](#)
- [Safety](#)
- [Grief and trauma](#)

#### Children basics

- [Childhood immunisation](#)

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- [Eating tips for school children](#)  
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- [Growth charts for children](#)  
[Babies and young children do not usually grow in a perfectly smooth way, but instead grow in 'bursts'...](#)
- [Immunisation – deciding which vaccines you need](#)  
[Everyone's immunisation needs are different and are influence by your health, lifestyle, age and occupation...](#)
- [Parenting services](#)  
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- [Child development \(7\) - three to four years](#)  
[Your child is starting to understand social skills like sharing and being kind, but they can only practise these skills for a short time while feeling safe and happy...](#)
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- [Growth charts for children](#)  
[Babies and young children do not usually grow in a perfectly smooth way, but instead grow in 'bursts'...](#)
- [Growth hormone](#)  
[Some athletes and bodybuilders wrongly believe that taking synthetic growth hormone will help build up their muscles...](#)
- [Immunisation history statements for children](#)  
[By law, parents or guardians must provide an Immunisation History Statement when enrolling children in any childcare service, kindergarten or primary school in Victoria...](#)
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[Adjusting to the many changes that happen around puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people...](#)
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### **Behaviour and learning**

- [10 tips for managing sibling rivalry](#)  
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- [10 tips to prepare your child for high school](#)  
[Visit the school before the school year starts ... 10 tips to prepare your child for high school...](#)
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[Be a positive role model ... 10 tips to raise an optimistic child...](#)
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- [A Healthy Start to School](#)  
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- [Behavioural disorders in children](#)

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- [Children and sibling rivalry](#)

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[Disciplining your child means teaching them responsible behaviour and self-control...](#)

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- [Oppositional defiant disorder \(ODD\)](#)

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- [Receptive language disorder](#)

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- [Sleep - children and nightmares](#)

[Your child may have only a few scary dreams a year, or be troubled by nightmares much more often...](#)

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[Children thrive with words of encouragement and praise...](#)

## Healthy eating

- [Body image and diets](#)

[Some people diet because they have a poor body image, not because they want to be a healthy weight...](#)

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[Children who skip breakfast may lack sufficient vitamins and minerals including iron, calcium, zinc and vitamin B2...](#)

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[Children are able to decide how much food they need for activity and growth if allowed to eat according to their appetite...](#)

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- [Healthy eating – school lunches](#)

[Simple ways to make your child's school lunch healthier...](#)

- [Healthy eating tips](#)

[A good balance between exercise and food intake is important to maintain a healthy body weight...](#)

- [Lunch boxes - healthy ideas](#)

[Healthy foods that are great for school lunch boxes...](#)

- [Lunch boxes - healthy shopping ideas \(video\)](#)

[Victorian State Public Health Nutritionist Veronica Graham takes us shopping for the right foods to include in your child's lunchbox...](#)

- [Lunch boxes - how to make them healthy \(video\)](#)

[Victorian State Public Health Nutritionist Veronica Graham shares three healthy and delicious lunchbox examples for the kids and provides some great food preparation tips to save you time throughout...](#)

- [Lunch boxes - menu planner](#)

[By planning ahead, you can make sure that your child's lunch box has each of the six key elements of a healthy lunchbox...](#)

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[Encourage children to help choose and prepare their own healthy snack or lunch...](#)

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[New Year's resolutions and how to stick to them...](#)

- [Vegetarian diets and children](#)

[Children can eat a vegetarian diet and stay healthy as long as their extra nutritional needs are met...](#)

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- [Children – keeping them active](#)

[A young child is naturally active, so build upon their inclinations to use their body...](#)

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- [Parent's guide for active girls](#)

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[Make sure that some family outings offer opportunities for physical activity, such as playing sport together...](#)

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## Managing weight

- [Body mass index \(BMI\)](#)  
[Body mass index or BMI is an approximate measure of your total body fat...](#)
- [Eating tips for school children](#)  
[Snacks are an important part of a healthy diet for active children, so offer nutritious as well as high energy snacks...](#)
- [Growth charts for children](#)  
[Babies and young children do not usually grow in a perfectly smooth way, but instead grow in 'bursts'...](#)
- [Obesity in children - causes](#)  
[Once children are overweight, it takes a lot of effort for them to return to a healthy weight...](#)
- [Obesity in children - management](#)  
[If your child is overweight, you can help by making healthier lifestyle choices for yourself...](#)
- [Overweight children - healthy lifestyle tips](#)  
[You can help your child to develop healthy patterns for life and avoid obesity...](#)
- [Parent's guide for active girls](#)  
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## Care and wellbeing

- [A Healthy Start to School](#)  
[A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school...](#)
- [A Healthy Start to School](#)  
[A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school...](#)
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[Being immunised from an early age helps protect your child against serious childhood infections...](#)
- [Children and health services](#)  
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- [Cyberbullying \(online bullying\)](#)  
[Cyberbullying \(or online bullying\) happens when technology is used to bully someone...](#)
- [Dental checks for young children](#)  
[Children should have an oral health check by the time they turn two...](#)
- [Immunisation history statements for children](#)  
[By law, parents or guardians must provide an Immunisation History Statement when enrolling children in any childcare service, kindergarten or primary school in Victoria...](#)
- [Immunisation in secondary schools](#)  
[Some immunisations are recommended for all Australian teenagers...](#)
- [Pain management \(acute\) - children](#)  
[If you think your child is in pain, always see your doctor for diagnosis and treatment...](#)

## Identity and relationships

- [10 tips for managing sibling rivalry](#)  
[Teach your children to sort out minor differences themselves... 10 tips for managing sibling rivalry...](#)
- [A Healthy Start to School](#)

[A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school...](#)

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- [Asthma explained](#)

[Asthma cannot be cured, but with good management people with asthma can lead normal, active lives...](#)

- [Asthma in childhood - triggers \(video\)](#)

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- [Constipation and children](#)

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[Children should always be closely supervised near animals and taught how to behave safely around pets...](#)
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[As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety and become safer road and bicycle users...](#)
- [Burns and scalds - children](#)  
[Most hot tap water scald injuries to children happen in the bathroom...](#)
- [Child safety and injury prevention](#)  
[By making a few practical changes to your home, you can dramatically reduce the risk of injury to your child...](#)
- [Child safety – at home](#)  
[The best way to reduce the risk of injury to children is to remove a potentially dangerous item or add a safety product...](#)
- [Child safety in the car](#)  
[Taking care to restrain children correctly while travelling in a car is the best way to prevent injuries...](#)
- [Cyberbullying \(online bullying\)](#)  
[Cyberbullying \(or online bullying\) happens when technology is used to bully someone...](#)
- [Farm safety – children](#)  
[Children who live on farms are at greater risk of injury and death than their parents or other farm workers...](#)
- [Hot weather and child safety](#)  
[Babies and children can quickly lose body fluids in hot weather, which can lead to dehydration...](#)
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[A child's digital footprint can be as easy to follow as their real footprints...](#)
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[Teach your child strategies for responding to mobile phone bullying...](#)
- [Playgrounds and child safety](#)  
[Play environments can be safe and beneficial for your child. With proper planning, you can make sure your child gets plenty of playtime activity...](#)
- [Poisoning and child safety](#)  
[Call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 immediately if you suspect your child has been poisoned or given the wrong medicine or the wrong dose of medicine...](#)
- [Road and traffic safety for children](#)  
[As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety, and become safer road users...](#)
- [Scooters and child safety](#)  
[Scooters can travel at fast speeds and falls and collisions are disturbingly common...](#)

- [Water safety for children](#)

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#### **Grief and trauma**

- [Child Protection Service](#)

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- [Cyberbullying \(online bullying\)](#)

[Cyberbullying \(or online bullying\) happens when technology is used to bully someone...](#)

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- [Child development \(7\) - three to four years](#)

[Your child is starting to understand social skills like sharing and being kind, but they can only practise these skills for a short time while feeling safe and happy...](#)

- [Children and literacy](#)

[Your child is literate if they know how to speak, read and write their language with confidence...](#)

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- [Child and Youth Health SA.](#)
- [Dietitians Association of Australia.](#)

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