

Preventing Obesity in Children, Teens, and Adults



Facts about obesity

Obesity is a long-term (chronic) disease. It affects growing numbers of children, teens, and adults. Obesity rates among children in the U.S. have doubled since 1980. They have tripled for teens. About 19 out of 100 children ages 2 to 19 are obese. More than 7 out of 20 adults are obese.

Healthcare providers are seeing more of these obesity-related problems in children and teens:

- Type 2 diabetes starting at a younger age
- Heart and blood vessel disease
- Obesity-related depression and social isolation

The longer a person is obese, the more they are at risk for problems. Many chronic diseases are linked to obesity. Obesity may be hard to treat. That's why prevention is very important.

Preventing obesity in children is vital. This is because childhood obesity is more likely to last into adulthood. An obese person has a high risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease.

Babies

Breastfed babies are less likely to become overweight. And the longer babies are breastfed, the less likely they are to be overweight as they grow older. But many babies fed with formula do grow up to be adults of healthy weight. If your child was not breastfed, it doesn't mean that they can't have a healthy weight. Talk with your child's healthcare provider if you have concerns.

Children and teens

Young people can become obese from poor eating habits, lack of physical activity, and not getting enough sleep. Genes can also affect a child's weight.

To help prevent obesity in children and teens:

- Don't just focus on a child's weight. Work to change family eating habits and activity levels over time.
- Be a role model. Parents who eat healthy foods and do physical activity set an example. A child is more likely to do the same.
- Encourage physical activity. Children ages 3 to 5 should have active play each day. Children ages 6 to 17 should have at least 60 minutes of medium physical activity most days of the week. More than 60 minutes of activity may help with weight loss and keeping a healthy weight.
- Reduce screen time. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) does not recommend screen time for children under the ages of 18 to 24 months. AAP recommends a 1-hour screen time limit for children ages 2 to 5. And AAP recommends an appropriate parent-monitored media use plan for older children. Do not allow screens in your child's room. Have your child stop using screens at least 1 hour before bed.
- Encourage children to eat only when hungry. Tell them to eat slowly.
- Don't use food as a reward. Don't keep food away from your child as a punishment.
- Serve healthy foods and drinks. These include fat-free or low-fat milk, fresh fruit, and vegetables. Don't buy soft drinks or snacks that are high in sugar and fat.

- Fill half of your child's plate with fruits and vegetables. Recommended serving sizes vary based on age, sex, height, weight and physical activity levels. Go to <https://www.myplate.gov/myplate-plan> to see your child's personalized diet recommendations.
- Encourage your child to drink water instead of drinks with added sugar. These include soft drinks, sports drinks, and fruit juice drinks.
- Promote good sleep with a consistent bedtime routine. Preschoolers need 11 to 13 hours of sleep per day, including naps. Children ages 6 to 12 need 9 to 12 hours of uninterrupted sleep a night. And teens ages 13 to 18 need 8 to 10 hours.

Adults

Good eating habits and physical activity can help prevent obesity. Tips for adults include:

- **Keep a food diary.** Write down what you eat, where you eat, and how you feel before and after you eat.
- **Make half your plate and vegetables.** Recommended serving sizes vary based on age, sex, height, weight and physical activity levels. Go to <https://www.myplate.gov/myplate-plan> to see your personalized diet recommendations.
- **Choose whole-grain foods.** These include brown rice and whole-wheat bread. Don't eat foods made with refined white sugar, flour, high-fructose corn syrup, or saturated fat.
- **Weigh and measure food.** This is so you can learn healthy portion sizes. For instance, a 3-ounce serving of meat is the size of a deck of cards. Don't order super-sized menu items.
- **Learn to read food nutrition labels and use them.** Keep the number of portions you are really eating in mind.
- **Balance your food checkbook.** If you eat more calories than you burn, you will gain weight. Weigh yourself each week.
- **Don't eat foods that are high in energy density.** This means foods that have a lot of calories in small amounts. For instance, a cheeseburger with fries can have as much as 1,000 calories and 30 or more grams of fat. Order a grilled chicken sandwich or a plain hamburger and a small salad with low-fat dressing instead. You can avoid hundreds of calories and lower your fat intake. For dessert, have a serving of fruit, yogurt, a small piece of angel food cake, or a piece of dark chocolate.
- **Reduce portion sizes.** Using a smaller plate can help you do this.
- **Exercise each week.** Aim for at least 150 minutes of medium to intense physical activity per week. For instance, this can be 30 minutes of exercise 5 days a week. Examples of medium-intensity exercise are walking a 15-minute mile. Or weeding and hoeing a garden. Running is a more intense activity.
- **Build activity into your day.** Look for ways to get 10 or 15 minutes of some type of activity during the day. Walk around the block. Walk up and down a few flights of stairs.

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