

Helping Your Child Maintain a Healthy Weight



Like any parent, you want your child to grow up healthy and happy. But unhealthy weight gain is a serious problem for many children. Being overweight can lead to serious lifelong health problems, such as diabetes. It can also hurt a child's self-esteem, lead to depression and anxiety, and cause isolation and bullying from peers. The good news is, there's a lot you can do to help them. And even if your child isn't struggling with weight, now is still a great time to teach healthy habits that will last a lifetime.



What causes unhealthy weight?

- **Not getting enough physical activity.** Kids ages 3 to 5 need to be physically active throughout the day. Kids ages 6 to 17 need about 60 minutes of physical activity a day. But this doesn't have to happen all at once. Several short periods of activity throughout the day are just as good. This can be in 10-minute chunks. Or even 5-minute chunks. If your children aren't used to being active, encourage them to start with what they can do. They can build up to 60 minutes a day.
- **Having too much screen time or lack of movement.** Watching TV, playing video games, and staying online can keep children from getting exercise they need to stay healthy. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends no screen time besides video chatting for children younger than 18 to 24 months. The AAP also advises that you limit screen time to less than 1 hour a day for children ages 2 to 5. For older children, the AAP advises creating a family media plan. You can [make your own media plan](#).
- **Making unhealthy food choices.** Eating too much junk food, such as soda and chips, can lead to unhealthy weight gain.
- **Eating large portions.** Serving adult-sized meals to children can provide more calories than kids need. Even healthy foods in large portions can provide too many calories.
- **Not getting enough sleep.** Good sleep helps prevent diseases. These include type 2 diabetes and obesity, injuries, and problems with attention and behavior. Children who don't get enough sleep are at risk for unhealthy weight gain. Remove screens from your child's room and stop use of screens at least 1 hour before bed time. Follow a sleep schedule every day. This can help children sleep better.

Dieting isn't the answer

Growing children need healthy food for strong bodies. They shouldn't be put on diets that limit calories. Instead, kids should be encouraged to play each day and to eat healthy foods instead of junk foods. This helps a child grow naturally into a healthy weight. Remember, being fit doesn't mean being thin. Healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes. Talk with your child's healthcare provider if you have concerns about your child's weight.

Set a good example

The most important role model your child will ever have is you. So you can't expect your child to change their habits if you don't set a good example. This might mean making changes in your own routine, such as watching less TV. But the results will be worth it! Setting a good example not only helps your child. It can help the whole family feel better. Involve other adults in your child's life. And never tease your child about weight.

Small changes add up

Changing habits isn't easy. But it helps if you don't try to tackle too much at once. Start with small things, like buying fruit for snacks. Or by taking your child for walks or doing other physical activities together. Over time, making small changes will add up to big improvements. Children can also adapt to changes better if they feel involved.

Good habits last a lifetime

Set a good example with words and actions. A game of catch can show your child that it's fun to be active. A trip to the store can be a lesson about choosing fruits and veggies. Teaching kids to make healthy diet and exercise choices is like teaching them to brush their teeth. Habits formed now will stay with them forever.

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