

Obesity

Obesity is an increasingly common problem in American children. Being obese can have lifelong harmful effects on your child's health as well as in other areas of his or her life. A diet that reduces calories and fat, along with increased exercise, is the recommended treatment. Although losing weight can be difficult, the doctor can help your family make important changes for a healthier lifestyle.

What is obesity?

Children are considered obese when their body mass index (BMI) is higher than that of 95% of children their age. The BMI is a calculated number based on the person's height and weight—the higher the BMI, the heavier the person is for his or her height. If the doctor says your child is “above the 95th percentile,” that means his or her BMI is higher than that of 95 out of 100 children of the same age.

In the United States, obesity rates are rising fast in children (and adults). Some of the many health problems related to obesity, including diabetes and high blood pressure, are also becoming more common in children.

Although genetic factors play a role, obesity nearly always results from a combination of too much food (especially high-fat foods) and not enough exercise. In many cases, childhood obesity is a sign that the whole family needs to make changes toward a healthier lifestyle. Losing weight can be difficult. However, a healthy diet and regular exercise can help to reduce your child's risk of serious health problems, now and later in life.

How is obesity diagnosed?

- Obesity in children is defined as a BMI (body mass index) above the 95th percentile for children of the same age.
- Children who are between the 85th and 95th percentiles are considered “overweight.” Children in this group are at high risk of continued weight gain.
- In older teens (and adults), obesity may be defined as a BMI of 30 or higher. (Occasionally, athletic teens will have a high BMI because they are very muscular, not obese or overweight.)

What are the causes and risk factors for obesity?

- Some children and teens are obese because of specific medical conditions, for example, hypothyroidism (low activity of the thyroid gland) or specific genetic abnormalities.

- *However, in the vast majority of cases, obesity results from too many calories and not enough exercise.* The main risk factors are lifestyle, including a diet that provides too many calories and not enough physical activity (exercise). Genetic (inherited) factors also play a role.
- Psychological issues can contribute to obesity; other times they are caused by obesity.
- There is a direct link between obesity and time spent watching television and playing video/computer games. The more time your child spends in front of a video screen, the higher his or her risk of obesity.
- Having obese parents—especially the mother—increases the chances of being obese as an adult. Overweight children or teens are more likely to be obese as adults.
- Breast-fed babies are at lower risk than bottle-fed babies.
- The risk is higher for African Americans (especially girls) and Hispanics.

What are the health risks of obesity?

Because it leads to so many other diseases, obesity shortens your child's life expectancy. Some of the many health problems related to obesity are:

- Type 2 diabetes.
- High cholesterol and triglycerides.
- High blood pressure.
- Cardiovascular (heart and blood vessels) diseases, including heart attacks and strokes.
- Obstructive sleep apnea (breathing problems during sleep).
- Bone and joint problems.
- Psychological problems (like depression and anxiety).

Can obesity be prevented?

Prevention is extremely important, because treatment of obesity is so difficult. Your family should build healthy eating and exercise habits while your children are young. Children learn from their parents—including eating behaviors.

How is obesity evaluated and treated?

Treatment of obesity starts with a complete physical examination, including measurement of blood pressure. Although uncommon, if a medical problem causing obesity (like hypothyroidism) is suspected, certain tests or visits to specialists will be recommended.

Depending on your child's age and the presence of risk factors for diabetes and cardiovascular disease (especially if parents or grandparents have diabetes or if anyone in your family has had a heart attack or stroke before age 55), certain blood tests may be recommended:

- Cholesterol and triglyceride levels—indicators of heart disease risk.
- Tests to determine whether your child has or is at risk for diabetes, such as fasting blood sugar level.

Diet and exercise are the main treatments for obesity:

- *Diet.* Your doctor will recommend a diet that is lower in calories and fat and higher in fiber. In most cases, we recommend that all family members over age 2 follow the new diet; when the children are obese, the parents may have weight problems as well.



- Infants and toddlers under age 2 should not be put on a low-fat or low-calorie diet, but should follow a healthy diet.
- Your doctor may recommend a visit with a dietitian, who can help develop a diet plan. It's usually best to introduce the new diet gradually.
- Recommendations may vary, but for most families "counting calories" is not the best approach. Usually, the results are best when the whole family makes changes in eating and exercise behaviors:
 - Serve a good variety of foods from all food groups: grains, vegetables, fruits, milk and other dairy foods, and meats and beans. Limit the amount of fats and sweets. The doctor or dietitian may recommend specific numbers of servings from each food group per day, including advice on proper serving sizes.
 - Cut back on snack foods like chips, cookies, candy. Avoid "fast foods" and prepackaged foods. For example, serve baked potatoes rather than French fries. For dessert, serve fresh fruit rather than sweets. For many children and teens (and parents), cutting back on or eliminating soft drinks (soda pop) can save a lot of calories.
- Children should be praised and rewarded for healthier behaviors (of course, the reward shouldn't be food!). Praise for healthy changes works better than criticizing or nagging for unhealthy behaviors.
- Diets should never be restricted so much so as not to supply necessary nutrients and vitamins.
- *Exercise/physical activity.* Calories provide energy—your child needs exercise to use up some of that energy. Being more active will not only help your child lose weight, but it will improve his or her general health.
- Try to provide opportunities for at least 30 minutes of physical activity every day. Build some exercise into

your child's (and family's) everyday routines. For example, your child can walk to school rather than being driven.

- Exercise doesn't necessarily mean a formal exercise program or going out for team sports. For younger kids, just getting outside and playing with friends is great exercise. A daily exercise video is a good idea, and something parents can do along with kids.
- Limit your child's "screen time"—TV and video games—to 1 or at most 2 hours per day. Don't let your child have a TV in his or her bedroom.
- Things to avoid:
 - In general, avoid "low-carb" and other fad diets. The goal is to build healthy eating habits for a lifetime, not just a temporary weight-reducing diet. Medications, "diet pills," and other products are generally not recommended.
 - In special cases, such as extreme obesity or obesity causing medical problems that don't improve with diet and exercise, prescription medications may be recommended. We may recommend a visit to an expert in treating obesity, often an endocrinologist (a specialist in hormone problems).
 - Don't smoke! Some teens (and adults) use smoking as a diet aid, believing that it will help them lose weight. This is not necessarily effective, and smoking leads to even more health problems.
- *Medical follow-up.* Regular weight checks are appropriate to see how well your child is doing.
- Don't get discouraged if weight loss isn't immediate or dramatic. For many children, just staying at the same weight for a time is a reasonable goal. For older children and teens, the recommended amount of weight loss depends on age, how overweight the child is, and whether complications like high blood pressure are present.

Weight loss should be gradual. Remember, your child needs enough calories and a good variety of foods to ensure proper nutrition. Sustained changes in diet and exercise habits are needed to control weight.



When should I call your office?

Call our office if you have any questions about treatment for your child's weight problem, including planning a healthy diet for your family.

Where can I get more information?

The American Heart Association offers a lot of helpful information on a healthy diet and lifestyle. On the Internet at www.americanheart.org, or call 1-800-AHA-USA-1 (1-800-242-8721).

