
Preventing Childhood Obesity

Many cultures hold the belief that being overweight is a sign of health and wealth. The reality is, being overweight or obese increases a person's risk of many chronic diseases, and children are no exception. Based on recent health studies, more than 30% of children in the United States are overweight, that's one in every three children. The largest increase was found in 6-11 year olds. Obesity is on the rise among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, as well as Native Americans. Some studies show that 2nd and 3rd generation Asian American children are more likely to be overweight, particularly those from low income families. Children who are overweight tend to become overweight adults with a greater risk for health problems.

Health risks of overweight children

- High blood cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Type 2 diabetes
- Fatty liver
- Asthma
- Sleep apnea
- Low self esteem
- Depression
- Behavioral and learning problems
- Eating disorders
- Joint problems

Contributing factors to childhood obesity

Too much food and too little exercise frequently lead to excessive weight gain. Genetic, hormonal, cultural, lifestyle and environmental factors also play a part. Although genetics play a role in determining one's body shape, weight problems that run in the family are more likely due to similar eating and exercise habits. When one parent is obese, the child has a 40% chance of being obese. The risk doubles when both parents are obese.

Diagnosis

The doctor measures your child's height and weight and calculates a ratio known as Body Mass Index (BMI). This number is plotted on a growth chart that is age and gender specific to determine whether your child is at risk of being overweight or is overweight.

Treatment

Children need the right amount of nutrients and calories for proper growth and development. Depending on the age of the child, treatment goal may be weight maintenance rather than weight loss, especially for young children. This allows the child to grow into his/her weight as he/she gains in height. In some cases, weight loss may be recommended for those who have related medical problems. Eating a healthy diet and increasing physical activities remain the keys to achieving a healthy weight. Your child's doctor may suggest that you consult a registered dietitian about an appropriate eating plan for your child.

Prevention

It is important to begin healthy habits at an early age, since dietary and exercise habits are often established during childhood. Research suggests that breastfeeding and late introduction of solid food (after 4 months of age) help to protect infants from becoming obese children. Parents also need to set a good example by adopting an active lifestyle and preparing and eating healthy meals. Below are some helpful tips for parents:

1. Encourage a healthy attitude towards food
 - Never use food as a reward or punishment, this can affect your child's preference for that food
 - Never force your child to clean the plate, this can encourage overeating

- Allow your child to decide how much he/she wants to eat
- Involve your child in food selections and preparation, he/she is more likely to be interested in tasting and eating the food
- Offer a variety of foods and encourage your child to try them, it may take 10 or more tries before your child will accept a new food
- Allow some favorite snacks in small quantities

2. Plan healthy meals and eat together as a family

- Start the day with a healthy breakfast, this provides energy and nutrition
- Offer more whole grains (whole wheat products, brown rice, oats, corn), colorful fresh fruits and vegetables
- Limit convenience foods, processed foods, take-out foods, eating out at restaurants and fast food places
- Limit high sugar foods and drinks - candies, pastries/buns, desserts, soda, sweetened drinks and juices
- Prepare foods with less oil by baking, boiling or steaming
- Offer healthy snacks and beverages – fresh fruit, sweet potato, corn on the cob, lowfat yogurt, lowfat milk, soymilk, water
- Sit down and eat meals together as a family, avoid watching TV, reading, playing video games when eating

3. Encourage and increase physical activities

- Be a positive role model by being active yourself
- Limit time spent watching TV, playing video games and on the computer to no more than 2 hours a day
- Aim for 60 minutes of physical activity a day for your child, designate a time for doing the activities
- Plan a variety of fun activities that the family can do together – walking, hiking, biking, skating, kite flying, swimming, camping, dancing, gardening, bowling

- Allow your child to choose activities that he/she likes to do and praise him/her for his/her effort

Children need acceptance, encouragement, support, understanding and love, no matter what size they come in. Parents are to be sensitive to these needs. By helping your child establish good health habits at an early age, the dangers of obesity may be greatly reduced.

For more information on how to help your children develop healthy habits, contact:

Chinatown Public Health Center
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Revised 1/2010

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