

It's an Epidemic: Childhood Obesity Is At an All Time High!

Obesity, or being overweight, is on the rise for children in the United States. Everyone's body has both muscle and fat. But it's the ratio or proportion of one to the other that will determine if a person is overweight or obese. Doctors and other professionals have developed a formula that looks at and rates the ratio of lean muscle and body fat a person should have. This ratio is based on a person's height and weight. This is called the Body Mass Index or BMI. With the BMI, a range of heights and weights are assigned a number which equals the body fat a person has with that height and weight. If a person has a BMI of 25 to 29, that person is said to be overweight, if the BMI is 30 or above, that person is obese.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, the number of obese children has more than tripled in the last 30 years. Nearly one out of every five children is overweight. Today, obesity is the number one national health concern for children. Children are now at greater risk for developing serious health conditions that once were "adult-only" problems.

Doctors are now seeing a growing number of children with:

- Type 2 diabetes;
- High cholesterol, high blood pressure (heart disease);
- Sleeping problems (apnea or interrupted breathing while sleeping);
- Asthma; and
- Low self-esteem (which could lead to depression)

This serious health development is of great concern to the Department of Health and Human Services and is a high priority for Secretary Tommy Thompson. As part of the Healthy People 2010 initiative and the response to the Surgeon General's call to prevent and decrease overweight and obesity, Health and Human Services has several resources to help families make healthy and nutritious food choices. Check out the dietary guidelines developed by HHS [here](#) . It also has a BMI chart that can be used to determine whether or not you and your family are within healthy lean muscle to body fat ranges.

Obesity and the health risks associated with it can be very difficult for children and families. There are many young children on strict diets who have to give themselves insulin shots because of diabetes. Many overweight children cannot sleep at night because they can't breathe properly. This interrupted breathing and lack of adequate sleep could have long-term effects on their developing brains and how they function.

The key to protecting children from the risks of obesity is prevention.

What Parents Can Do

There are usually several explanations for why children gain too much weight. The main reasons include eating too much food, not eating a balance of the right kinds of food, and

not getting enough exercise. Obesity is not only a major concern for children, but for adults as well. Adults (and children) are busier and more stressed than ever. They tend to eat on the go, stay indoors more, and do low-energy activities that don't require movement (such as television, videos, or the computer). This contributes to weight gain.

Maintaining healthy eating habits and participating in regular physical activities are the two essential ingredients that will help beat the odds of obesity. Parents play a major role in ensuring that their children eat nutritious and well-balanced meals and participate in enjoyable, heart-pumping activities everyday! Parents can start with the following suggestions:

- Monitor and guide your children's food choices.
- Prepare snacks that are nutritious (cut up carrots, yogurt, fruit)
- Limit or remove all foods with sugar and more than 30 percent fat.
- Start the family on a regular physical activity that is fun and good for the body (biking, rollerblading, volleyball). Do it together as a family.
- Make eating healthy a family rule that everyone follows.

If your child is already overweight, seek the help of your family pediatrician who can determine the best weight for your child and provide guidance on nutrition and weight goals.