

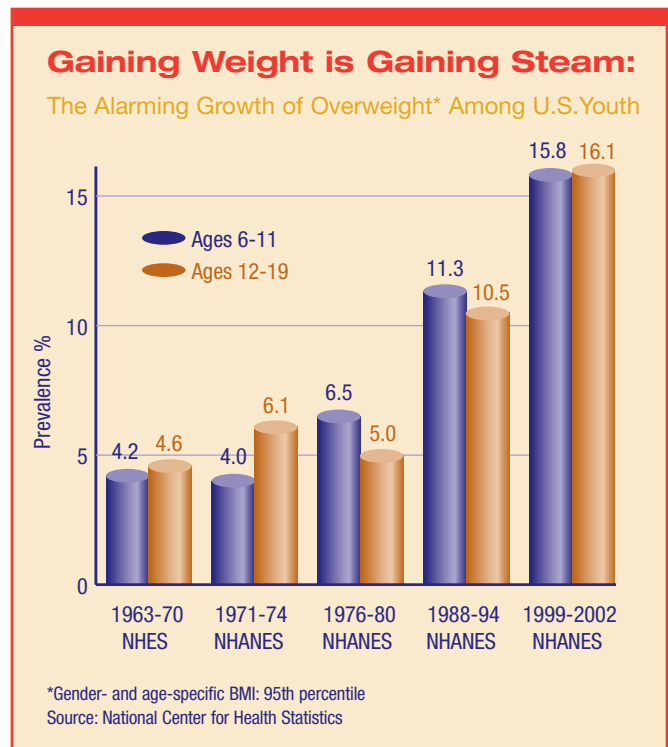
HEALTHY WEIGHT

Facts for Families

The Childhood Obesity Crisis: What Does it All Mean?

Is this generation of youth really more overweight than previous generations? Yes. In fact, the percentage of children and teens in the United States who are overweight has more than tripled since the 1970s (see chart), and growth in overweight since the 1980s is particularly alarming. This is true for both boys and girls. The rise in the number of youth who are overweight, combined with the health problems that excess weight causes, have led public health officials to classify childhood overweight as an epidemic.

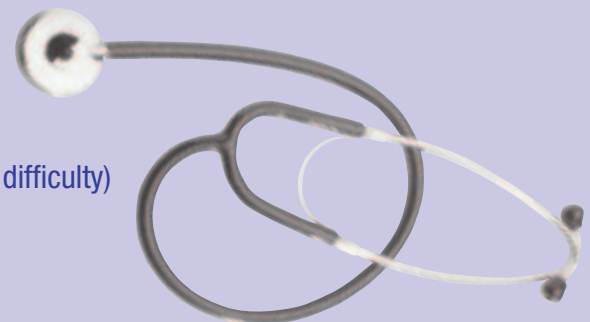
How does being overweight affect a child's health? Overweight children are at much greater risk for health problems now and in the future than children who are within a healthy weight range. Serious weight related conditions that were once rare in youth, like high blood pressure and type 2 diabetes, are now being seen more frequently by pediatricians. It is important to understand that the longer a child remains overweight, the greater their risk for serious long-term health problems.



An overweight teen is 70 to 80 percent more likely to become an obese adult than a teen who has a healthy weight, which puts them at greater risk for future health problems such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, certain cancers, arthritis, depression and other diseases.

10 Serious Health Threats for Overweight Youth:

1. High blood pressure
2. High blood cholesterol
3. Type 2 diabetes
4. Asthma
5. Accelerated growth
6. Hip or knee pain
7. Depression
8. Low self-esteem
9. Sleep apnea (nighttime breathing difficulty)
10. Liver and gallbladder problems



Healthy eating and regular physical activity are both the prevention and the cure for overweight children.

How do you determine if a child is overweight? Don't trust your eyes. The best way to find out if a young person between the ages of 2 and 20 is overweight is to have a physician measure their Body Mass Index-for-age (BMI-for-age). These measurements should be a standard part of your child's routine physical examination or well child visit, and the results will determine whether a child is underweight, healthy weight, at risk of overweight or overweight (see sidebar, below).

If your child is overweight or at risk, your family's health care provider should initiate a plan to help your child achieve a healthy weight. This usually entails a more complete examination of your child as well as questions about the family's eating and physical activity habits. For more information, see the *What if my child seems overweight?* fact sheet.

Should an overweight child go on a diet? In most cases, no. For most overweight children, the recommended goal is not to lose weight but rather to stop or slow weight gain as the child continues to grow so that their height and weight eventually achieve a healthy balance. Many overweight children

gained too much weight largely because of the unhealthy foods they were fed—so parents have to be part of the solution. A health care provider treating an overweight child will usually work with the entire family to encouraging better nutrition and eating habits as well as healthier levels of physical activity.

When a young person is diagnosed as overweight and has one or more serious weight related medical conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure or sleep apnea, a health care provider may feel that weight loss is needed. In such cases, a diet that aims to reduce a child's weight by about one pound per month until a healthy weight is achieved is usually recommended. For more information about weight loss for children, see the *What if my child seems overweight?* fact sheet.

Why are more children today overweight? The short answer is too much unhealthy food and not enough physical activity. There are genetic reasons why some children are overweight; however, for the vast majority of overweight children, the cause is as simple as an imbalance between calories eaten and calories burned.

BMI-for-age

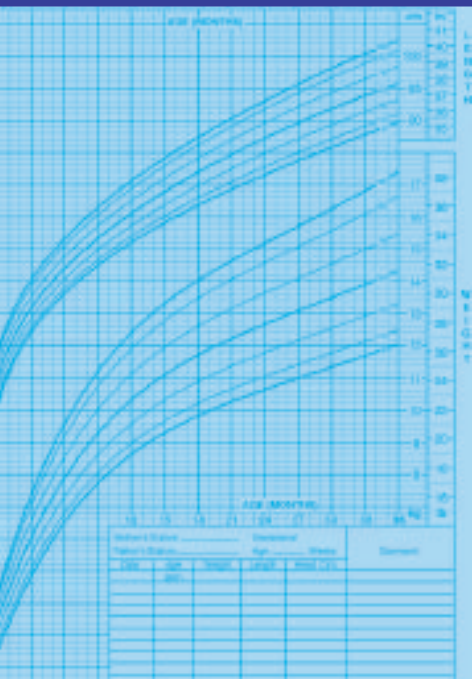
For many years, physicians plotted children's height and weight on a standard growth chart. But children's body fat changes as they grow and levels of body fat differ between boys and girls, so the old growth charts have been improved to take these differences into account. The improved charts, called BMI-for-age growth charts, were updated in 2000 but not all health care providers have made the switch. Parents should be sure to ask that BMI-for-age growth charts are used to assess their child's growth and weight.

Underweight » BMI-for-age < 5th percentile

Healthy Weight » BMI-for-age > 5th percentile to < 85th percentile

At Risk of Overweight » BMI-for-age > 85th percentile to < 95th percentile

Overweight » BMI-for-age > 95th percentile



What can be done to prevent young people from becoming overweight?

Healthy eating and regular physical activity are both the prevention and the "cure" for overweight children. Research shows that prevention is easier and more effective when parents start early, so instill healthy eating and exercise habits at an early age and reinforce those habits as children develop.

Don't worry if you are just starting to address nutrition and exercise with your children. Small changes can have big health benefits and will start your family on a course for better lifelong health. For detailed information on how to improve nutrition and physical activity, see the *Eat Well, Live Well and Get Up! Get Busy! Get Healthy!* fact sheets.

Leading Causes of Childhood Overweight

Poor Nutrition:

Processed Foods

- ▶▶ Americans eat an average of 4.2 commercially prepared meals each week.
- ▶▶ Processed foods are likely to be higher in calories, fat, and salt and lower in fiber than natural meals prepared at home.

Fast Food

- ▶▶ Consumption of fast food by children has increased fivefold since 1970.
- ▶▶ Each day about one-third of children eat fast food.
- ▶▶ On days that fast food is eaten, a child consumes on average about 187 more calories than a child not eating fast food. This equates to an extra 6 pounds of weight per year.

Super-Sized Portions

- ▶▶ Packaged food and restaurant serving sizes have greatly increased. For example, a small soda used to be 6 1/2 oz. but now 20 oz. sodas are widely available.

Sugars and Refined Flours:

- ▶▶ In the last 20 years, children's consumption of soft drinks has doubled, while their consumption of milk has decreased 40 percent.
- ▶▶ The refined flours used in many breads and pastas have been stripped of vitamins, minerals and fiber and they convert to sugar more rapidly than whole flours.

Irregular Meal Patterns:

- ▶▶ Studies demonstrate that family meals promote positive dietary intake among children, yet many families report that they eat fewer meals together than past generations.

Inactivity:

Electronic Media

- ▶▶ Children now spend an average of 5 1/2 hours a day using electronic media, more time than they spend doing anything else besides sleeping.
- ▶▶ Even preschoolers spend as much time with screen media as they do playing outside.

Less Physical Activity in School

- ▶▶ Many schools have drastically curtailed daily physical activity classes:
 - only 8% of elementary schools have daily Physical Education
 - only 6% of middle schools have daily Physical Education
 - only 6% of high schools have daily Physical Education

Declining Activity After School

- ▶▶ 62% of children ages 9 to 13 do not spend any time outside of school hours in organized physical activities, such as sports.
- ▶▶ 23% of children report no physical activity at all during their free time.






Riding Instead of Walking

- ▶▶ Many children are driven almost everywhere they go, so few children walk or ride bikes to school and other activities.




Understanding What Foods to Eat and How Much to Exercise


How many servings do you need each day?

FOOD GROUP	Children ages 2–6 years (~1,600 calories)	Older children, teen girls (~2,200 calories)	Teen boys (~2,800 calories)
 Grains Group » Bread, Cereal, Rice, and Pasta—especially whole grains	6 servings	9 servings	11 servings
 Vegetable Group	3 servings	4 servings	5 servings
 Fruit Group	2 servings	3 servings	4 servings
 Dairy Group » Milk, Yogurt, and Cheese—preferably fat free or low fat	2 or 3* servings	2 or 3* servings	2 or 3* servings
 Protein Group » Meat, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans, Eggs, and Nuts Group—preferably lean or low fat	2 servings for a total of 5 ounces	2 servings for a total of 6 ounces	3 servings for a total of 7 ounces

How much physical activity do you need each day?



Children ages 2 to 6
 » An accumulation of more than 60 minutes, and up to several hours every day, of age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate activity is ideal. Some of the child’s activity each day should be in periods lasting 10-15 minutes or more and include moderate to vigorous activity.



Older Children and Teens
 » An accumulation of more than 60 minutes, and up to several hours every day of play, games, sports, work, transportation, recreation, physical education or planned exercise is ideal. Teens should engage in at least three sessions of physical activity per week that require moderate or vigorous exertion.

Dietary guidelines adapted from U.S. Department of Agriculture, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. The Food Guide Pyramid, Home and Garden Bulletin Number 252, 1996. Physical activity guidelines adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Maternal and Child Health Bureau.



The Business Group’s tool kit, *Reducing Child and Adolescent Obesity*, is made possible by support from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the Health Resources and Services Administration, Health and Human Services. Read all of the fact sheets in this series to learn about the many ways overweight can be prevented and treated. The series is available at www.businessgrouphealth.org/prevention/et_childobesity.cfm