

Why are our children obese?

Studies have shown that overweight kids face potential health problems (for example, sleep apnea, diabetes, and bone and joint problems), low self-esteem, developmental problems and heart-breaking discrimination.

It's difficult, and often counterproductive, to define how much your child is overweight. Physical size and growth among kids vary, even of the same age. Kids are considered mildly overweight if they are up to 20% above the recommended weight for their age, sex and height; over 20% reflects the beginning of mild obesity.

Experts agree on three main causes:

- **Physical:** Some children are simply genetically predisposed to be heavier. They inherit a stocky body type; have bigger bones or more fat. The genetic link is a reason why some people are fighting an uphill battle—that can be won.
- **Emotional:** In some instances, kids may eat for emotional nourishment rather than physical hunger. Like adults, they try to numb uncomfortable feelings of anxiety, loneliness or anger in response to stressful situations at home or school. Weight is often a symptom, not the cause, of emotional upset.
- **Environmental:** A child with at least one overweight parent has twice the chance of becoming a heavy adult. Kids often do what they see; as adults, many of us are not setting a good example.

A more sedentary lifestyle and the easy availability of high-fat foods and beverages take much of the blame for the rise in childhood obesity. Our kids spend more of their "play" time in front of computers or the television set. Exercise should be a part of a kid's life, and it should be fun.

Should kids be put on a diet?

No! Most experts agree that diets are unhealthy for children, except in extreme circumstances. Diets that limit calories, fat, protein or carbohydrates can actually be harmful to a child's healthy growth. Besides, they rarely succeed.

What is the alternative?

More and more experts have turned to a no-diet, self-accepting approach with proven success. At the core of this approach is the revolutionary idea of giving our kids back control over their food choices. It's a gradual, but usually successful, process.

- **Are you hungry?** Children will naturally eat when hungry. Help them to get back in tune with this feeling and identify when they are eating out of hunger versus other feelings. When your child reaches for a snack, ask, "Are you hungry?" If the answer is yes, let them eat.
- **What would you like to eat?** Make healthier foods like fruits and vegetables plentiful in your home and minimize "junk foods," but give your child the freedom to choose. When "forbidden" foods become just like any other food choice, a natural desire for variety will take over.
- **Are you still hungry?** When children tune into their bodies, they will stop eating when full. Ask them, "Are you still hungry?" If the answer is yes, then a snack or seconds are not only okay, but necessary.

If our children learn to eat when they are hungry only, eat the foods they enjoy without guilt, and stop when they are full, they develop the foundation to grow up without food issues and weight obsessions.



Nutrition nugget: Know when you're full!

Did you know that after you eat a meal, it takes 20 minutes for your brain to recognize that your stomach is full? Eating quickly or gulping your food can lead to overeating and result in weight gain. Instead, take your time when eating:

- Set your silverware on the table between bites.
- Chew slowly.
- Savor each bite.
- Before you have a second helping, wait a little bit to be sure that you are still hungry.



Keeping cholesterol in check

Most of us know we're supposed to watch our cholesterol, but do we know exactly what that means?

Our bodies use cholesterol to make new cells, hormones and vitamin D. However, too much leads to trouble. High blood cholesterol is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

To travel through our bloodstream, cholesterol is coated with a protein—and is thus renamed "lipoprotein." Low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or "bad" cholesterol, is responsible for much of the plaque buildup in arteries. High-density lipoprotein (HDL), or "good" cholesterol, cleanses the arteries by bringing cholesterol back to the liver.

Knowing, and lowering, our *total* cholesterol level is not enough. It's also important to keep bad/LDL cholesterol low and good/HDL cholesterol high to prevent plaque buildup in our arteries. A "lipid profile" lab test will reveal these numbers. [See box.] Talk with your doctor about your results.

That brings us to diet and exercise. Our liver produces all the cholesterol our bodies need, but we add to it by eating cholesterol-rich foods (such as meats, whole-milk dairy products and egg yolks). Plus, we add saturated fats (common in dairy products such as ice cream and butter, as well as baked goods) that trigger the liver to overproduce cholesterol.

So *what* we eat often makes a difference in our cholesterol health. Also, exercise can raise good/HDL levels while lowering the bad/LDL cholesterol. The message is clear: *Eat sensibly and be more physically active.*

Experts suggest:

- **Eat more fruits and vegetables.** (They don't have cholesterol!)
- **Limit meat in your diet**—and choose lean varieties.

- **Eat fiber-rich foods** such as oats, whole-grain bread and apples.
- **Use low- or no-fat dairy products.**
- **Avoid fried foods and baked goods**, which are high in saturated fat.

When diet and exercise aren't enough, your physician may recommend a cholesterol-lowering medication.

Now you know what "watching your cholesterol" means. Almost everyone can benefit from being active and eating a heart-healthy diet. Aren't you worth it?

Seasonal flu and you

While there are many different flu viruses, the flu vaccine protects against the three viruses that researchers believe will be most common this flu season. Here are some reminders about the flu vaccine:

- One of the three viruses this year's vaccine will protect against is the H1N1 virus (swine flu) that caused so much illness last season. If you got an H1N1 flu shot last year, you still need this year's flu shot.
- Everyone 6 months of age and older should get a flu shot. Children younger than 6 months, though at high risk for serious illness, are too young to be vaccinated. People who care for them should be vaccinated instead.
- People at high risk for serious flu complications, and most in need of vaccination, include young children, pregnant women, people with chronic health conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, heart or lung disease) and people 65 years and older.
- Flu shots are important for health care workers and other people who live with or care for high-risk people.
- It is medically impossible for flu shots (no live virus) or the intranasal flu sniff to give you the flu.

Cholesterol guidelines*

| Risk | Total cholesterol | LDL | HDL |
|------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------|
| High | Above 239 | Above 159 | Less than 35 |
| Borderline | 200 - 239 | 130 - 159 | n/a |
| Desirable | Below 200 | Below 130** | Above 60 |

* Recommended by the National Cholesterol Education Program sponsored by the National Institutes of Health.

** If you have heart disease or diabetes, your goal for LDL may be below 100. Talk to your doctor.

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