

Help your child reach *a healthy weight*

Being overweight can affect a child's health and self-esteem, yet one in five children in the U.S. falls into this category. Parents of overweight children often impose strict diets or exercise routines, but kids—like adults—tend to rebel.



If your child's weight concerns you, talk to his or her pediatrician. The doctor will start by calculating your child's body mass index (BMI). If it's too high, the doctor will tell you what it should be and help you develop an action plan. This plan will likely involve changing three key things: your child's diet, activity level, and sleep.

Diet

Make healthy eating a family affair. Studies have shown that kids who eat meals with their families have healthier diets and lower obesity rates. Left on their own, children are likely to choose unhealthy foods or overeat.

To get your child interested in healthier foods, let them help you plan a healthy menu each week. Be sure to include lean proteins, whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products. Your child might complain, but stand firm. Studies have shown that the more kids see a food, the more likely they are to try it. If your child gets used to seeing fruits and veggies on their plate, they'll start eating them.

And remember to focus on improving your child's eating habits, not on reducing their weight. If you replace soda with water, limit junk foods, and offer healthy snacks, the difference should show on the scale.



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Exercise

For many kids, video games and computers have replaced physical activity. In fact, a government study found that the amount of time kids spend being active drops between the ages of 9 and 15. The decline is fastest between the ages of 12 and 15.

“Getting exercise is crucial for lifelong health, and the habit should start in childhood,” says Amanda Budzowski, an exercise physiologist and health coach at UPMC Health Plan.

Children need at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day, according to Ms. Budzowski. It can help them stay at or reach a healthy weight, strengthen their bones, and build their muscles.

“Inactivity sets kids up for all sorts of problems as they get older—from type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure to obesity,” Ms. Budzowski says.

You can help your child by making exercise a priority for your whole family. Ride bikes together on weekends and go for walks after dinner. Sign your child up for an after-school sport, then practice with them at home.

Sleep

Numerous studies have found a link between weight gain and a lack of sleep. (The National Sleep Foundation says adolescents need up to 9¼ hours a night.) Some research has shown that a chronic lack of sleep can change a child’s hormone balance and slow their metabolism. This can increase their risk for obesity.

To help your child have a restful night, limit distractions in the bedroom. You might need to remove the TV or take the cellphone or tablet. Come up with a routine to help your child wind down. It could include reading, stretching, or talking about plans for the next day.

Talk to your child about the importance of getting enough sleep. Remind him or her how great it feels to wake up after a full night’s rest.

Children who are overweight often become overweight adults. You can help your child avoid this. By making small changes, you can set your child up for a lifetime of good health.

Source: Bradley, R. H., McRitchie, S., Houts, R. M., Nader, P., O’Brien, M., & NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2011). Parenting and the decline of physical activity from age 9 to 15. The international journal of behavioral nutrition and physical activity, 8, 33. doi:10.1186/1479-5868-8-33.

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