



# Is my child overweight?

## The Big Picture

Across the country, the trends are alarming: 25% of Canadian children are considered overweight. These children are at risk of becoming obese and experiencing serious health problems such as type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure.

The risk of obesity increases when more time is spent watching television and taking part in sedentary activities. A study by the Canadian Medical Association Journal showed that the average Canadian child is inactive for three to five hours a day in front of the TV. This doesn't include the five to seven hours most children spend sitting in school five days a week or time at the computer and video screens.

Diet also plays a major role in childhood obesity. When time is tight, parents often opt for meals on-the-run. Eating "super-sized" fast foods, convenience foods, and restaurant meals contribute to poor food choices. Busy parents are also less likely to initiate or participate in family physical activities.



## Consider all shapes and sizes

An overweight child probably knows better than anyone else if weight is a problem. However, physicians and dietitians can assess a child's weight using national standards based on age and sex.

Don't assume your child is overweight through comparisons to friends and siblings. Everyone inherits a body type and some are naturally thinner than others. Keep in mind that all children, no matter what their size or shape, benefit from a family or childcare environment where everyone accepts a wide range of body sizes and avoids drawing attention to body size.

Children follow their own patterns of growth in height and weight. They often appear to be a little "pudgy" before a growth spurt.

*Contact your physician or a dietitian if you think your child has a weight problem.*

## Take early steps

You can help your children achieve and maintain a healthy weight. Begin early by encouraging physical activity and good eating habits.

Keep in mind that discussing weight issues is a sensitive subject. Excessive concern with weight and dieting is linked to the development of eating disorders and other unhealthy dieting behaviours. Be sure to plan your actions to avoid serious problems.

- Do not single out the overweight child.
- Promote a healthy eating pattern for the entire family rather than using a controlling measure such as restricting food intake for the heavier children.
- Never use food as a reward or withhold food as a punishment.
- Be a role model by eating a healthy, well-balanced diet.
- Never tell a child that s/he is "on a diet" or "too fat".

If your child is obese, intervention programs specifically designed for children are recommended. These programs have components focusing on nutrition, physical activity and self-esteem.

It is important to keep in mind that children are growing and their nutritional requirements are quite high compared with adults. Putting kids on a "diet" can lead to problems with growth and development and be psychologically harmful.

## Activity is Key

The most important part of your action plan is to focus on a more active lifestyle for your child.

Physical activity improves muscle mass and increases the amount of calories required by the body, helping to regulate body weight.

### Get moving

- Be a role model. Your child learns by watching you. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Leave the car at home for short trips. Try a new activity.
- Provide regular opportunities to learn lifetime skills such as swimming, skating or soccer.
- Participate in family activities. Play Frisbee or badminton in the backyard or enjoy an after-dinner cycle on the trails.
- Encourage your child's favourite activities even if they require little energy, like bowling. This gets him away from the television screen, and may lead to participation in higher energy activities.



- Increase the amount of exercise gradually.
- Focus on participation and fun in team sport events, not on winning. Compliment them on their efforts.
- Vary the activities. Keep it interesting.
- Invite friends and neighbours to get involved.
- Be positive and encouraging. Have FUN.

- Limit the time your child watches television, plays video games or surfs the Internet.

## Move in the right direction

Studies show that the more physically active kids are, the more physically active they want to be.

The goal for kids is 90 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day. Any continuous activity that raises a child's heart rate and makes them breathe more rapidly is ideal.

## Eat Good Food

Your child needs a lot of nutrients for growth and development. That's why, to prevent obesity, it's best to increase activities rather than reduce intake of healthy foods.

Try not to control the amount your child eats. This only leads to a struggle. Help your child eat in a way that allows her to grow up with, and feel good about, the body that's right for her.

- Offer healthy meals and snacks
- Let them know that junk foods like pop, chips, candy or chocolate can be eaten occasionally but not on a daily basis.
- Schedule regular eating times. It's alright to say, "don't eat now, dinner is in 45 minutes." Or, "get out of the fridge, you've just had a snack."

Parents are responsible for the food that's available in the house and how it's presented. Children are responsible for how much they eat.

## Be Veggie Wise

You're the most important influence on your child's attitude toward food. Studies show that the father's acceptance of vegetables directly relates to his child's acceptance.

Here's what you can do:

- Introduce your child to vegetables outside mealtime. Plant a vegetable garden, visit a farmers' market, take her grocery shopping, pick out a recipe together, or let her help prepare and serve vegetables.
- Introduce new foods. The more a child is exposed to a new food, the more likely she is to accept it. It can take up to twelve or more exposures to a new food for a child to try it.
- Offer vegetables when your child is most hungry.
- Provide a choice of two vegetables.
- Try the one-bite rule. Encourage your child to take one bite of a food. If he doesn't like it he doesn't have to eat it.

Snacks provide children with essential nutrients. That's why the best snacks are found in Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating. *Contact your nearest Health Unit office for a copy.*

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## Watch the Fats

Most children eat too much food that's high in fat, sugar, and salt. Surveys show there's room for improvement.

- Only one out of five children eats the recommended five or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily.
- One out of two children is not getting enough milk products each day.
- Children drink more pop than milk.
- 25% of all vegetables eaten by children are French fries.
- Children typically consume five to ten times the salt they need. Most is from processed foods.
- Many children eat junk food daily.

## Assess Your Family's Eating Habits

Your approach to food choices and eating habits affects your child. Take a couple of minutes to consider these questions and check the answers.

- Yes  No *Does your family eat one meal together each day for most of the week?*
- Yes  No *Do you limit your child's fruit juice to a maximum of 1 1/2 cups per day?*
- Yes  No *Do you limit the amount of foods high in fat, sugar and salt that are eaten by your child?*

If your child eats chips, pop, candy, chocolate bars, pastries, cookies on a daily basis, please answer no. *(The exceptions are homemade "healthy" cookies and muffins).*

- Yes  No *Does your family eat three regular meals and small healthy snacks daily?*
- Yes  No *Does your family eat fruits and vegetables every day?*
- Yes  No *Does your family eat breakfast every morning?*
- Yes  No *Are there a variety of foods available every day for your family?*

If you answered NO to any of these questions, your family's eating habits could be improved.

## Build Self Esteem

It's often hard to help kids feel good about the way they look. Unfortunately, our culture emphasizes the importance of a thin body for females and a muscular, lean body for males.

A child can form a negative body image and poor self-esteem at an early age. According to a study, 40% of nine-year-old girls in Ontario have already dieted, despite being at a healthy weight. By grade ten, 5% of males had tried steroids at least once.

Know that a parent's preoccupation with a child's weight may damage his or her self esteem.

### **No matter what your child's weight, always:**

- encourage physical activity;
- choose healthy foods;
- teach your child that people come in all shapes, weights, sizes and colours;
- support your child in building self-esteem; and
- use positive words in your conversations, such as "super", "good for you", "wonderful".

See the activities, Body Image Messages and Things I am Besides a Body, at the end of this resource.



## Things I am besides a body

Complete this activity with your child to help him/her identify the many assets and abilities we all have beyond our appearance.

Some things that I like about myself are:

Some things that make me interesting are:

Some things that I am interested in are:

Some things that I am good at are:

Some things that are important to me are:

Different roles that I play in life (such as sister, brother, friend) are:

## Body Image Messages

Review the following questions. They will help you identify unhelpful messages you may be sending to children.

Am I dissatisfied with my shape or size? If yes, do I talk about this? Who do I talk to? Can children in my care overhear?

Am I always on, or going on, a diet? Are children in my care aware of this?

Do I express guilt when I eat certain foods?

How many times have I associated the word "fat" with negative words such as "stupid", "lazy" or "ugly", or made the opposite association "nice and skinny"?

How many times have I heard, or said, within hearing distance of a child, "Oh, have you lost weight, you look wonderful!"

*The overall message children should receive from adults is that people come in a variety of shapes and sizes.*

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For copies of Canada's Food Guide and Canada's Physical Activity Guides for children and youth, contact the Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit.

Adapted from Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Health Unit resource "Encourage a Healthy Weight for Your Child."

For more information contact a Public Health Dietitian at the Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit.



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