



# FACT SHEET

## The overweight child - a family approach

There is rarely a day without attention of the media on the increasing numbers of overweight children in our community. You may be worried that your child is overweight, or a doctor or teacher may have mentioned this to you.

### ‘Overweight child’- what does that mean?

Children come in different shapes and sizes, just as they have different colour eyes. However, there is a range of weight that is generally considered healthy. Above that range, we would describe a child as overweight when they have more stored fat than is usual for their age and height. (‘Obese’ is a term to describe more pronounced overweight; other than for definitions, we will use the word overweight to describe both overweight and obesity).

### How to tell if your child is overweight

Assessing weight in children is quite complicated; always seek professional advice if you are concerned. Parents often worry that there may be an underlying medical problem causing overweight. This is very unlikely, but you should discuss your concerns with your doctor. The most usual way to assess a child’s weight is to compare the Body Mass Index (BMI) against the usual BMI for your child’s age and gender.

### Body Mass Index (BMI)

Although commonly used in adults, BMI in children changes at different ages, and a chart is needed to interpret the BMI. The BMI is calculated by:

$$\frac{\text{Weight (kg)}}{\text{Height (m)} \times \text{Height (m)}}$$

E.g. if your child is 35kg and 140cm tall (1.4m tall) then the BMI calculation is:

$$\frac{35}{1.4 \times 1.4} = \frac{35}{1.96} = 18$$

The charts are available at [www.keepkidshealthy.com/growthcharts](http://www.keepkidshealthy.com/growthcharts). They show the usual BMI range in centiles, with BMI above 85th centile being overweight. BMI is a starting point to assess your child’s body size. If the BMI is above the 85th centile you may want to talk to a health professional about any lifestyle changes or further advice you might need.

### How does a child become overweight?

An important consideration is your family background, or genetics. Along with many other things about us, genetics decides our basic body type. However, more influential than genetics is our lifestyle - the food we eat and the activity we do. Lifestyle runs in families too, but from family influence, not genetics. Energy balance is very finely tuned! A small but regular imbalance between the amount of food eaten (Energy In) and the amount of exercise (Energy Out) makes a significant difference over time. An extra small packet of crisps or a glass of soft drink, or 20 minutes less time in active walking or play each day, means a 2kg difference in expected weight over a year.

### What should parents do?

If your child is overweight there are some things you can do. The ‘wait and see’ or ‘it is just puppy fat?’ approach is not supported by research. There is a very high chance that an overweight child will become an overweight adult. Generally, overweight children will not become lean without some assistance.

### Potential health and social problems for the overweight child

There are some health problems associated with being overweight as a child, but most health problems will occur only if overweight continues. If you have a strong history of diabetes or heart disease you may want to discuss this with your doctor. Some potential problems are:

- Increased risk of becoming an overweight adult
- Raised cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Raised insulin (signalling increased risk of diabetes)
- Joint problems (sore ankles and knees)
- Breathing problems, snoring and sleep disturbances
- Teasing and possible bullying at school
- Social isolation
- Difficulty in keeping up with peers, which can lead to reduced activity

The best way to assist an overweight child is with long-term changes towards choosing a healthy eating pattern and more physical activity. This approach is especially important for children, as strict dieting and extreme eating patterns may affect growth and development. If you can help your child make permanent changes now, you are helping them for life.

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### Family involvement is essential to success

Research tells us that the best way to help children achieve successful changes is for the whole family to be involved. Depending on the age of your child, and whether they are concerned about their weight, you may want to discuss making lifestyle changes with your child. If so, emphasise changes in health and fitness, and a change in body shape over time. With younger children, some parents successfully make changes without needing to let the child know their concerns. Older children need to be involved and take a greater part in their own plans, but still need family support and involvement. Family involvement means that all members of the family are cooperative with the lifestyle changes needed. This means encouraging (and perhaps participating in) more activity, and supporting healthier food choices. You may need to discuss this also with older siblings and with grandparents. It will take some time to make changes, and to find out what works for your family, but try different ideas and keep working at it. Remember, everyone in the family will benefit from the changes.

### Rapid weight loss is not the goal

A good result is a slowing of the expected weight gain over time, or maintaining weight steady while height increases. If a child is very overweight some weight loss may be needed, but this should be around 1kg a month. Variety is a key to choosing a healthy diet, especially lots of different fruits and vegetables. Snack time can be tricky and too much choice of snack foods, at one time, may encourage the need to 'have some of everything'. Include variety on a day-to-day basis. If you are at home, put out the snacks, rather than allowing a 'pantry raid'.

### Important guidelines for healthy eating

Children are very much influenced by their parents' eating patterns. If you enjoy a range of foods, including fresh fruit and vegetables, chances are your children will also. Here are some useful tips for families:

- Consider snacks like toasted sandwiches, chopped fruit, low fat yoghurt and soups;
- Include three meals and two to three snacks daily;
- Breakfast is an essential meal for thinking and vitality; breakfast cereal, canned fruit and reduced fat milk is ideal;
- Base your shopping and cooking around the "everyday" foods: e.g. low fat dairy foods, lean meat and fish, lots of fruit and vegetables, cereals and pulses;
- Encourage water as a drink, rather than soft drink, cordial or juice;
- Offer "sometimes" foods of sweets and higher fat snacks occasionally, not everyday;

- Make family choices about eating when you write the shopping list, and when you do the shopping, not at the refrigerator or pantry door; and
- Watch portion sizes and limit "seconds" (cooking only what is needed for the meal helps).

### Important guidelines for more activity

Remember to encourage your child with praise, and positive feedback. Start an activity chart and offer a small (non-food) reward after 10 or 20 attempts. Never offer rewards related to weight. Team sports and school sports will not replace extra active play and walking. Overweight children may not enjoy team sports, so make better use of the time by walking, long bike rides, or kicking the football with them (they're bound to have far more kicks than playing in a team!). With older children, some 'biofeedback' from a pedometer, or a heart rate monitor, can be fun and motivating.

To get your child to be more active:

- Include more active play and walking;
- Ensure less sedentary activity: i.e. less time with TV and screen games;
- Walk to school or home a few days a week;
- Fix the basketball ring, and shoot some hoops with them;
- Buy a dog (and walk it!);
- Dance to music;
- Walk to the shops, or park further away;
- Go roller-blading or ice-skating instead of a movie;
- Enjoy 'mucking around', instead of TV; and
- Make sure family outings include some active time.

### SUMMARY POINTS

- For a child to successfully lose weight, the whole family must be supportive and helpful.
- A growing child does not need to lose too much weight. It is best for them to maintain their weight and let them 'grow into' it, or to lose weight slowly.
- Activity, whether as sport or play, is crucial for a child to successfully control their weight.
- Encourage three meals a day, along with healthy snacks.
- Missing meals does not help weight control.
- See [Fact Sheet 12](#) for more ideas on feeding junior athletes.

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