

# Children And Weight

**The concern about steadily rising rates of overweight children in the United States has grown considerably in recent years. Unhealthy weight gain due to poor diet and lack of exercise is responsible for over 300,000 deaths in the United States each year. This sheet helps you understand the facts about unhealthy weight gain in young people and how parents can help manage it.**

## **WHAT IS CONSIDERED OVERWEIGHT?**

A few extra pounds is not overweight. However, it may indicate a tendency to gain weight easily and a need for changes in diet and/or exercise. Generally, a child is not considered overweight until the weight is at least 10 percent higher than what is recommended for the height and body type. Weight gain most commonly begins in childhood between the ages of 5 and 6 and during adolescence. Studies have shown that a child who is overweight between the ages of 10 and 13 has an 80 percent chance of becoming an overweight adult.

## **WHAT CAUSES YOUTH TO BE OVERWEIGHT?**

The causes of weight gain are complex and include genetic, biological, behavioral and cultural factors. Basically, weight gain occurs when a person eats more calories than the body burns up. If one parent is overweight, there is a 50 percent chance that the children also will be overweight. However, when both parents are overweight, the children have an 80 percent chance of being overweight. Weight gain in childhood and adolescence can be related to:

- poor eating habits
- lack of exercise (e.g., couch potato kids)
- family history of overweight
- medical illnesses (glandular, neurological problems)
- medications (steroids, some psychiatric medications)
- stressful life events or changes (separations, divorce, moves, deaths, abuse)
- family and peer problems
- low self-esteem
- depression or other emotional problems

## **WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND COMPLICATIONS OF WEIGHT GAIN IN CHILDREN?**

There are many health risks and complications with weight gain. Physical consequences include:

- increased risk of heart disease
- high blood pressure
- diabetes
- breathing problems
- trouble sleeping

Child and adolescent weight gain also is associated with increased risk of emotional problems. Teens with weight problems tend to have much lower self-esteem and be less popular with their peers. Depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder also can occur.

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## HOW CAN WEIGHT GAIN BE MANAGED AND TREATED?

Overweight children need a thorough medical evaluation by a pediatrician or family physician to consider the possibility of a physical cause. If there is no physical disorder, the only way to lose weight is to reduce the number of calories consumed and to increase the child's or adolescent's level of physical activity. Lasting weight loss can occur only when there is self-motivation. Since weight gain often affects more than one family member, making healthy eating and regular exercise a family activity can improve the chances of successful weight control for the child or adolescent.

### WAYS PARENTS CAN HELP:

- increase physical activity (especially walking) and have a more active lifestyle
- change eating habits (eat more slowly, develop a routine)
- plan meals and make better food selections (eat fewer fatty foods, avoid junk and fast foods)
- control portions and consume fewer calories
- monitor what children eat at school
- eat meals as a family around a table with conversation, instead of while watching television or at the computer
- do not use food as a reward
- limit snacking
- attend a support group (e.g., Weight Watchers, Overeaters Anonymous)

When an overweight child or adolescent also has emotional problems, a child and adolescent psychiatrist can work with the child's family physician to develop a comprehensive treatment plan. Such a plan would include reasonable weight loss goals, dietary and physical activity management, behavior modification, and family involvement. Parents of an overweight child can improve their child's self-esteem by emphasizing the child's strengths and positive qualities rather than just focusing on his/her weight problem.

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