

## Healthy lifestyles to prevent and manage overweight in childhood

The number of overweight children and adults is increasing; about one quarter of children in Australia are now overweight. Encouraging children to eat healthy food and be physically active can be a challenge. It requires patience, practice and time. Research shows overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults. Childhood is an important opportunity to develop healthy patterns for life and prevent weight problems.

### How do I know if my child is overweight?

Sometimes it is hard to tell if a child is overweight. This is because children have different shapes at different ages. With more overweight children around, our view of 'normal shape' changes. Your family doctor, local maternal and child health nurse or an experienced health professional will be able to check your child's growth.

### What problems may occur for overweight children?

Overweight children can experience several difficulties. Most often, they feel different from other children. Being overweight may cause children to worry about taking part in physical activity and eating in front of others. Parents of some overweight children believe their child's quality of life is less than that of other children.

Although health problems are less common in childhood, children who continue to be overweight into adulthood can develop high blood fats, high blood pressure, joint and breathing problems.

### What causes overweight in childhood?

Food and drinks provide energy 'in' to the body, and activity is energy 'out' of the body. To maintain a healthy weight your child needs to balance the amount of energy in, with the amount of energy out. A high-energy diet with little physical activity will lead to your child being overweight. Children who are active can also gain weight if food provides more energy than needed. Family eating and activity patterns can also affect body weight. We may inherit our body type and shape but we learn eating and lifestyle habits from our family, school and community settings.

### What do I do if my child is overweight?

If your child is overweight, seeking the advice of a health professional is important, as young children should not be on restrictive diets. A lifestyle of healthy eating and activity is most successful. It is important to value each child and to avoid comparing overweight children with leaner brothers or sisters or friends. Overweight caused by medical conditions is rare, but check if concerned.

### Include the whole family in healthy lifestyle changes.

Children learn from their parents, grandparents, carers and other family members, so it is important for the whole family to be involved in changes, regardless of body weight. It may take a number of attempts to make long-term changes and this can be frustrating. Keep trying and offer praise for small efforts; be positive and offer regular support.

### How to make healthy family food choices

A healthy diet is not only what your child eats, but how much. All children should eat regularly including healthy snacks.

**Good nutrition starts early in life.**  
Wherever possible try to:

- breastfeed infants; introduce solids at around six months
- encourage a wide variety of nutritious foods as all foods play a role in healthy eating and no particular food should be forced or overly restricted
- introduce reduced-fat dairy products from two years of age
- offer mostly wholegrain bread and cereals, vegetables and fruits with moderate amounts of meat products and dairy foods
- limit intake of added fats such as oil, margarine and butter
- instead of processed 'snack' foods, offer more fresh vegetables and fruit
- offer treats such as cakes, chips or take-away foods only occasionally
- limit sweet drinks, including juice, cordial and soft drinks, as they are not necessary
- offer water – it is the best drink for children.



**TAP INTO  
WATER  
EVERYDAY**

## Ways to encourage healthy changes to your child's eating

- Buy, prepare and offer the foods you would like your child to eat. Allow them to choose what, and how much of these foods they will eat.
- Keep offering healthy foods even if they are initially refused.
- Include your child's choices in the family menu.
- Make healthy food fun by cutting fruit or vegetables or arranging into different shapes.
- Involve children in simple food preparation.
- Let your child decide if they have had enough, as this encourages children to better understand feelings of hunger and fullness. These habits may help to control appetite and prevent overeating as they grow.
- Encourage slower eating if your family eats quickly. Put your knife and fork down between mouthfuls. Chat during the meal.
- Help your child recognise if they eat when bored, sad or lonely. Try to suggest another activity to help distract them.
- Although difficult sometimes, try not to punish, reward or cheer your child up with food.

## Fun family activity

Be a good role model to your child by leading an active lifestyle. Plan and ensure your child is physically active on a daily basis. At least 60 minutes of active play is recommended but if the overweight child is already completing 60 minutes per day then changing the intensity of activity or participating for even longer may be needed.

Although it is not necessary for parents to be active every day with their child, family activity is important.

Physical activity can help to build physical, mental and social skills and increases feelings of being healthy.

Activity should be fun and satisfying, without focusing only on competition, fitness or skills.

As children get older, your role as a parent changes from being active with your child to supporting your child's involvement with outside activity.

### Increase everyday activity at home

- Be active together. Family-based activities should happen at least once per week.
- Encourage lots of free, outside playtime every day.
- Try to use the car less; for shorter distances walk or cycle to school or the shops. Have a plan to walk increasingly further distances.
- Help your child find a balance between organised team sport, individual activities like swimming and dancing, and fun activities, such as youth groups, voluntary community service and family outings.
- Try to find an activity that your child enjoys, is readily available, affordable and matches your child's age and skill level. Ask your child's physical education teacher, child care worker, community centre or other parents for options.
- Look for an active play buddy who can encourage your child to be more active.

Be supportive and encouraging. Encouraging 'less motivated' children to be active is not always easy. Remember if your child gets hot, puffed and sweaty when active, this is generally a good sign they are working their bodies and benefiting from physical activity. Ensure they start the activity hydrated and have access to water during or following the activity.

## Is television a problem?

Watching too much television is often linked closely with overweight in children. Inactive behaviour is not just watching television, it also includes playing electronic games, sitting for long periods of time in transit, long sleep-ins and extended phone calls. When children watch television they are not being active and are more likely to see food advertisements that encourage them to eat regardless of hunger.

Televisions in bedrooms have been shown to increase viewing time. Try to:

- limit sedentary activities like watching television to less than two hours per day.
- avoid eating while the television is on
- suggest or offer alternative activities to television watching.



**TURN OFF,  
SWITCH  
TO PLAY**

## Important tips for preventing overweight in children

- Involve the whole family in healthy eating and activity.
- Be consistent and patient.
- Encourage active play and activities that provide the opportunity to move above resting levels.
- Limit inactive time, such as television, to no more than two hours per day.
- Find opportunities for your child to be active for a minimum of 60 minutes per day.
- Families should organise activity together on a weekly basis.
- Help your child learn when they are feeling hungry or full.
- Limit sweet and high fat foods and drinks.
- Water is the best drink.
- Help your child recognise if he or she eats when bored, sad or lonely. Try to suggest another activity to help distract them.
- Encourage slow, enjoyable eating.
- Find fun ways to reward your child and family, without using food.

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