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# Considering... Childhood Obesity

A Parents' Guide to Prevention

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Childhood obesity is a growing problem in the United States. Today, nearly 9.2 million children and teenagers between the ages of 6 and 19 are overweight or obese. This has been linked to an unhealthy lifestyle and poor dietary habits. For example, some children may spend more time watching television, surfing the internet, or playing video games than they do exercising or playing outdoors; others may eat a diet that includes too much fast or "junk" foods. Studies show that children and teenagers who are overweight or obese can develop *type 2 diabetes*, high blood pressure (*hypertension*), and other forms of heart (*cardiovascular*) disease. Preventing your children from becoming overweight or obese is a process that involves the whole family. Here are some helpful tips to get you started.

## Make Food Shopping a Fun and Healthy Family Experience

- ❖ Let your children pick healthy foods they like; they're more likely to eat foods they choose. Just remember to avoid the soda, chips, and cookie aisles, and checkout lines with a candy display!
- ❖ Buy 100% whole-grain breads (instead of white) and low-salt, low-fat deli meats and cheeses for sandwiches.
- ❖ Stock up on bottled water rather than sugary sodas and juices (including sports drinks).
- ❖ If your children enjoy ice cream, buy them fat-free frozen yogurt instead; it's lower in calories and fat, and your kids probably won't taste the difference!
- ❖ Portable yogurt (it's usually sold in a tube) is a cool and healthy snack; choose the low-fat varieties. At home, mix plain low-fat yogurt with ½ cup of fresh fruit.
- ❖ Skip the packaged flavored milk and make your own: mix low-fat (1%) or fat-free (skim) milk with 2 teaspoons of chocolate syrup for a tasty, healthy drink.
- ❖ Always check nutritional food labels for information on calories, fats (including saturated and trans), cholesterol, salt, carbohydrates, and sugar. Also, look for portion-controlled packaging for appropriate child-sized snacks and drinks.

## Create Ways to Cook Smart and Eat Healthy

- ❖ Add fresh fruit to cereal, pancakes, and muffins.
- ❖ Bake, broil, or grill meats like fish, lean beef, and skinless chicken and turkey.
- ❖ Try to avoid frying meats and other foods; it just adds empty calories and fat. If you occasionally fry foods, use canola or olive oils, which are lower in saturated fat than vegetable or corn oils.
- ❖ Use "invisible" strategies. For example, when making lasagna use part-skim or fat-free cheeses instead of the whole-milk varieties—you'll reduce calories and fat.

## Ordering Out? Make the Right Choices!

- ❖ Order a medium pizza rather than a large; everyone will get the same number of slices, just in smaller portions.
- ❖ Don't "super-size" the fries and soda! Bigger portions mean one thing: weight gain. Better yet, skip the sides entirely or order a fruit cup or salad instead of fries.
- ❖ Children love kids' meals for one reason: toys! Make the meals healthier by substituting a hamburger with a chicken sandwich, and soda with water. Take it two steps farther: ask for a wheat bun and no mayonnaise.

## Get Them Moving!

- ❖ Remember you are the parent! Limit time in front of the TV and computer by encouraging outdoor play or participation in organized sports.
- ❖ Involve the whole family in physical activity—by doing this, overweight children won't feel "different" or "set apart."
- ❖ Turn weekends into family time by taking your children to the park. Ride bikes, rollerblade, dance—anything to keep moving!
- ❖ Make exercise "fun" by letting your children decide what activities they want to do. If they resist, reverse the situation: tell them they can ride their bikes for 30 minutes before starting chores. Chances are, they'll beg for 20 more minutes just to avoid the chores!

## Some Things to Consider:

- ❖ Be a role model. If you practice healthy habits, your children will follow your lead.
- ❖ Avoid labeling foods as "good" or "bad." All foods in moderation can be part of a healthy diet.
- ❖ Try not to bribe or reward your children with food ("If you don't eat everything on your plate, you will not get dessert"); occasionally, however, you might praise them for trying new foods they don't like.
- ❖ Sometimes goals need to be adjusted; it's better to create a new plan than to stick to one that isn't working!

**REFERENCES:** Gidding SS, Dennison BA, Birch LL, et al. Dietary recommendations for children and adolescents: a guide for practitioners. Consensus statement from the American Heart Association. *Circulation*. 2005;112:2061-2075. • Kavey REW, Daniels SR, Lauer RM, Atkins DL, Hayman LL, Taubert K. American Heart Association Guidelines for Primary Prevention of Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease Beginning in Childhood. *Circulation*. 2003;107:1562-1566. • American Heart Association. *Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics-2006 Update*. Available at <http://www.americanheart.org>. Accessed November 22, 2006. • National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. *We Can! Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition: Families Finding the Balance. A Parent Handbook*. 2005. NIH Publication 05-5273.

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