

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:
A Letter for Parents by the
NYU Child Study Center

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 9

May 2004

CHILDHOOD OBESITY: A GROWING PROBLEM

What is obesity?

Obesity is defined as an excessively high amount of body fat in relation to lean body mass. Overweight refers to increased body weight in relation to height, when compared to some standard of acceptable or desirable weight.

How common is childhood obesity?

Childhood obesity has become a disturbing national epidemic and has grown considerably in the past two decades. The percentage of children and adolescents who are defined as overweight has more than doubled since the early 1970s. According to the Centers for Disease Control, about 15 percent of children and adolescents are now overweight. Ironically, obesity is among the easiest medical conditions to recognize but most difficult to treat. Overweight children are much more likely to become overweight adults unless they adopt and maintain healthier patterns of eating and exercise. In fact, 30% of adult obesity begins in childhood.

What is BMI?

BMI or Body Mass Index is one important way of deriving desirable weight standards. As of August 2003, the American Academy of Pediatrics adopted its first policy dealing with the identification and prevention of childhood obesity by urging pediatricians to check BMI yearly. In children and teens, body mass index is used to assess underweight, overweight, and risk for overweight. BMI between the 85th and 95th percentile for age and sex is considered at risk of overweight, and BMI at or above the 95th percentile is considered overweight or obese. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, BMI uses a mathematical formula in which a person's weight in pounds is divided by the square of the person's height in inches and the result is multiplied by 703. For example, a child who weighs 130 pounds and stands at 4'6" (54 inches) has a BMI of 31.3 [$130/(54 \times 54) \times 703$] which falls above the 95th percentile.

What are the effects of obesity?

Overweight and obese children, as compared to children with a healthy weight, are more likely to develop various health problems, such as high cholesterol and high blood pressure, which are associated with heart disease in adults. Type 2 diabetes, previously considered an adult disease, has increased dramatically in overweight children and adolescents. Children at a healthy weight are generally free of these weight-related diseases and less at risk of developing these diseases in adulthood. The most immediate consequence of being overweight, as perceived by children themselves, is social discrimination and low self-esteem.

The results of a recent study, in which obese children rated their quality of life, indicate that teasing at school, difficulties playing sports, fatigue, sleep apnea and other obesity-linked problems severely affect obese children's sense of well-being. Interestingly, parents answered the same questionnaires and their ratings of their children's well-being were even lower than the children's own self-ratings.

What can I do as a parent?

As a parent, you have a very important role in helping your overweight child. It can be difficult to alter a child's or adolescent's routine, however, engaging and motivating the whole family can make changes seem exciting. It is true that you cannot always monitor your child's behavior outside of the home, but you can encourage a healthy lifestyle in your home.

Some recommendations of the American Obesity Association are:

- Make sure your child's doctor monitors your child's weight gain and calculates his or her BMI yearly.
- If there is concern about his or her weight, get your child a thorough medical evaluation to consider the possibility of a physical cause.
- In the absence of a physical disorder, the only way to lose weight is to reduce the number of calories being eaten and to increase the child's or adolescent's level of physical activity.
- Busy families look for easy dinner options, which are often unhealthy. Take some extra time and involve the whole family in creating a weekly healthy eating plan.
- Make meals together and educate children about healthy eating options.
- Keep fatty and sugary snacks to a minimum, especially sugar-laden soda.
- Limit frequency of fast-food eating to no more than once per week.
- Keep bottled water, fruits, vegetables, yogurt and low-fat snacks readily available.
- Increase physical activity, perhaps by taking a few brisk walks with your child each week.
- Let your child know he or she is loved and appreciated whatever his or her weight. An overweight child probably knows better than anyone else that he or she has a weight problem. Overweight children need support, acceptance, and encouragement from their parents.
- Be a good role model for your child. If your child sees you enjoying healthy foods and physical activity, he or she is more likely to do the same now and for the rest of his or her life.

What should I avoid doing?

- Avoid making different meals for different family members.
- Avoid using food as a reward or punishment.
- Avoid serving portions that are very large.
- Avoid forcing your child to eat when he or she says they are full or not hungry.
- Avoid too much television watching; it encourages unhealthy snacking, reduced physical activity, and less desire to eat healthy meals.

When should I seek professional help?

If your child's doctor has determined that your child is overweight or at risk for being obese or if you are concerned about your child's weight, self-esteem, sedentary lifestyle, and/or unhealthy eating habits, then it is time to seek professional help.

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ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212)263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8552.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, AboutOurKids.org.



**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health
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The Parent Letter has received generous support from the following donors: Joseph Healey and Thomas Walker.