

How do we *Help Kids* who are overweight?

By Deneen Vojta, MD

Being overweight is a growing problem among children. Many families today however, are confused by all of the press about overweight children. Here are some commonly asked questions by concerned families:

What does it mean for a child to be overweight?

Overweight means that body weight for height is higher than normal compared to others who share the same height and age. When a child is overweight, he/she has a Body Mass Index greater than 85 percent of other children of the same gender and age. This may be a sign of too much body fat and should be addressed before the situation potentially worsens.

What is BMI? BMI stands for Body Mass Index. It is a mathematical formula that compares weight to height. BMI is one of the main tools used by doctors to determine if a person is overweight.

How can I be sure if my child is overweight? BMI is a very good screening tool to tell if your child may be overweight. However, parents should ask their doctor to be sure.

Why do children gain excess weight?

Excess weight gain occurs when children eat and drink more than their bodies need. Everything eaten gets turned into energy measured in calories. A child's body needs calories as energy for all of the activities they do each day. Children gain excess weight when they eat more calories than they use and the body stores these extra calories as fat.

Are there other reasons why a child may be at high risk for gaining weight?

Yes, some people who are born with certain genetic conditions are at increased risk of being overweight. While it is true that genetics play a role for many overweight people, even at-risk people can lose weight if they adopt healthy behaviors related to eating and activity.

Do parents play a significant role? If one parent is overweight, a child is three times more likely to be overweight as well. If both parents are overweight, the child is 10 times more likely to be overweight. Parents have a very strong ability to impact the choices their children make in terms of eating behaviors and activities. A parent can support healthy behaviors by serving as a role model, providing healthy food options, establishing family meal times and engaging their children in activities.

How can I help my overweight child?

Successful weight loss happens with a team approach. Parents are the most important people in helping children get to a healthy weight. By supporting goals, modeling healthy behaviors, and praising effort, parents can provide the ultimate support. Minimize super sized fast food choices and maximize opportunities for

physical activities. Get the whole family involved in the pursuit of a healthy lifestyle.

Below are practical tips for overweight children and their families:

Better food choices: In order to help your family make better food choices, separate your food choices into three categories: red, yellow and green. "Red" foods are high in fat and sugar. They are full of empty calories. Soda, cookies, candy, stop and think before you eat these. "Yellow" foods have nutritional value and should make up the majority of our calories. Most carbohydrates like breads, pasta, and starches are yellow foods. Carbohydrates and other yellow foods are essential parts of our diet but too much can lead to increased hunger and weight gain. Eat yellow foods in moderation and use caution when considering "seconds." "Green" foods include most fruits and vegetables. Go ahead and eat them. They have lots of nutritional value, are low in fat and sugar, and can be very satisfying.

Smaller food portions: How much your family eats is as important as what your family eats. The amount of food eaten each day affects a person's risk to gain weight. If a family member eats



more than they need for their daily activities, they are likely to gain weight. Therefore, paying attention to the amount of food your family eats will help them control portion sizes and will eventually lead to weight loss.

Increased activity levels: The more your family exercises each day, the more calories they will burn. In essence, our bodies are similar to cars, and food is similar to gas. If a car rarely moves, it doesn't need to be filled with gas very often. If a body is inactive, it doesn't need to be filled with food as often. Inactive families that fill their bodies with calories are more likely to gain weight.

Decrease sedentary activity such as television, computer games and the Internet: Believe it or not, too much television viewing will cause weight gain. When in front of a screen, people tend to eat more and exercise less and metabolism significantly slows. The average American child is spending approximately seven hours a day watching TV, playing video games, and using the computer. Reduce screen time to help children lose weight.

Identify your motivation to lose weight: A family's motivation for weight loss can be sustained if the family sets goals together. When a family puts all its emphasis on an individual family member's weight, it is easy for that child to feel ganged up on and defeated. Instead, emphasize individual and family goals for weight loss. Discuss why your family wants to lose weight and build a healthy lifestyle. Take

the emphasis off the weight itself, and motivate each other through shared goals and outcomes.

Set realistic goals: The more sensible the goal, the greater the chance your family will achieve it. Families don't need to make big changes in order for weight loss to happen. Even very small changes in behavior can result in big weight changes over time! Slow weight loss increases your chances of keeping it off long after the program is finished. Weight loss can be very difficult for some people, especially when starting far from your ultimate goal. Parents, it is important that your child not be punished for setbacks. Children should not feel badly when goals are not met but should be encouraged to keep trying.

Celebrate successes: Positive reinforcement is a powerful motivator. Verbal praise and tangible rewards are effective tools in supporting behavior change. Overweight children, many of whom suffer poor self-esteem, are especially receptive to these tools.



Deneen Vojta, MD is the Founder of MYnetico, a weight management program for children. Currently, she serves as Chair of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare's Work Group on Childhood Obesity. Dr. Vojta is a graduate of Temple Medical School and trained in Pediatrics at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. In 2003, she was named "Top 40 under 40" by the Philadelphia Business Journal.