

The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity

THE PROBLEM OF OVERWEIGHT IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

- Type 2 diabetes, previously considered an adult disease, has increased dramatically in children and adolescents. Overweight and obesity are closely linked to type 2 diabetes.
- Overweight adolescents have a 70% chance of becoming overweight or obese adults. This increases to 80% if one or more parent is overweight or obese. Overweight or obese adults are at risk for a number of health problems including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and some forms of cancer.
- The most immediate consequence of overweight as perceived by the children themselves is social discrimination. This is associated with poor self-esteem and depression.

THE CAUSES OF OVERWEIGHT

- Overweight in children and adolescents is generally caused by lack of physical activity, unhealthy eating patterns, or a combination of the two, with genetics and lifestyle both playing important roles in determining a child's weight.
- Our society has become very sedentary. Television, computer and video games contribute to children's inactive lifestyles.
- 43% of adolescents watch more than 2 hours of television each day.

GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

- 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.
- Focus on your child's health and positive qualities, not your child's weight.
- 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.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

- Be physically active. It is recommended that Americans accumulate at least 30 minutes (adults) or 60 minutes (children) of moderate physical activity most days of the week. Even greater amounts of physical activity may be necessary for the prevention of weight gain, for weight loss, or for sustaining weight loss.
- Reduce the amount of time you and your family spend in sedentary activities, such as watching TV or playing video games. Limit TV time to less than 2 hours a day.

HEALTHY EATING SUGGESTIONS

- Guide your family's choices rather than dictate foods.
- Encourage your child to eat when hungry and to eat slowly.
- Eat meals together as a family as often as possible.
- Carefully cut down on the amount of fat and calories in your family's diet.
- Don't place your child on a restrictive diet.
- Avoid the use of food as a reward.
- Avoid withholding food as punishment.
- Children should be encouraged to drink water and to limit intake of beverages with added sugars, such as soft drinks, fruit juice drinks, and sports drinks.
- Plan for healthy snacks.
- Stock the refrigerator with fat-free or low-fat milk, fresh fruit, and vegetables instead of soft drinks or snacks that are high in fat, calories, or added sugars and low in essential nutrients.
- Aim to eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day.
- Discourage eating meals or snacks while watching TV.
- Eating a healthy breakfast is a good way to start the day and may be important in achieving and maintaining a healthy weight.

IF YOUR CHILD IS OVERWEIGHT

- Many overweight children who are still growing will not need to lose weight, but can reduce their rate of weight gain so that they can "grow into" their weight.
- Your child's diet should be safe and nutritious. It should include all of the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) for vitamins, minerals, and protein and contain the foods from the major Food Guide Pyramid groups. Any weight-loss diet should be low in calories (energy) only, not in essential nutrients.
- Even with extremely overweight children, weight loss should be gradual.
- Crash diets and diet pills can compromise growth and are not recommended by many health care professionals.
- Weight lost during a diet is frequently regained unless children are motivated to change their eating habits and activity levels for a lifetime.
- Weight control must be considered a lifelong effort.
- Any weight management program for children should be supervised by a physician.