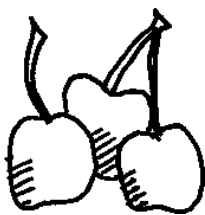


Childhood Obesity



According to recent studies, the incidence of obesity in our children has shown a dramatic increase. While only four states had 14 percent of their children labeled as obese in 1991, 47 states, including California, reported the same numbers by 1998. People are obese if they weigh significantly more (>20%) than their ideal body weight, the weight that maximizes the life span for a person of a given height.

Our society fosters obesity in children who are genetically predisposed toward the condition. Children are eating more fats and sugars, eating fewer fruits and vegetables, and leading more inactive lives than ever before. The availability of fast food and snacks and the number of hours spent with televisions and computers have a direct impact on children's growth and development.

Our beliefs about food and health affect our children's weight as well. Some families view a fat baby as a healthy one; some use food for comfort, reward or bribery. These ideas can support unhealthy food habits. In addition, some young children spend the majority of their day with a caregiver other than their parent, and this person can also influence his or her development.

Why is obesity a problem?

Obesity is dangerous because it can set the stage for adolescent and adult health problems such as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and high cholesterol. It is linked with the early onset of puberty.

What can parents do to prevent childhood obesity?

Be aware of and respond to your children's feeding cues. This means paying attention not only to when children are hungry, but when they are full.

Offer nutritious meals and snacks, such as fresh fruit, whole grain breads, leafy greens, etc.

Consider breastfeeding. Research indicates that breast-fed babies are less at risk for becoming obese.

Reduce or eliminate the amount of time your child spends watching television or playing video or computer games.


Model good nutrition. Parents have a profound influence over children's development in the early years, including the formation of eating habits. As parents, we owe it to our children to learn more about nutrition and health and model healthy behavior.

Make active play with your children a daily habit. Daily planned play with children that requires being active indoors and outside, and involves adult family members, can help prevent obesity. Children need aerobic activity daily as well as free play. Try walking, running, marching, dancing, swimming, climbing or any other activity that makes you breathe harder and makes your heart beat faster. Have fun!

When choosing child care, note that healthy habits are modeled there as well. Make sure the children have active play every day. The preschool years are important for learning movement and developing motor skills. Programs should ideally provide opportunities for active play and for practicing and learning physical skills in safe environments.

by Gail Gonzalez, RN



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