

House Call – Advice for Parents
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Question: *Every day I am hearing more and more about overweight children and health problems they may develop. How do I know if my children are overweight? What are the health problems they may have if they are overweight?*

Answer: Obesity has been declared an epidemic in the United States with nearly 65% of adults and at least 30% of children being overweight. African American and Hispanic children are disproportionately affected. Today, approximately nine million young people are considered overweight in the US.

Unhealthy childhood overweight has become increasingly important medical and public health concerns. Among the most common conditions associated with childhood overweight are high blood pressure, insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes mellitus, lung disease (asthma and sleep apnea), early puberty, high blood lipids, musculoskeletal problems, and psychological problems that often persist into adulthood and are life-shortening.

Body Mass Index (BMI) is the primary measurement for assessing weight in adults and children. The calculation of childhood BMI is based on an individual's gender, height and weight, and is helpful, although not the only indicator of childhood overweight.

Your primary care provider can (and should) determine your child's BMI at each visit. BMI that are greater than 85% for age and gender of the child are considered at risk for health problems or overweight. Symptoms of these problems are often absent and are typical of high blood pressure, insulin resistance, type 2 diabetes, high blood fats, vitamin D deficiency, and lung problems (like sleep apnea in children).

It is very important that your primary health care provider carefully determine blood pressure, cholesterol, LDL, HDL, triglycerides, and liver function. A careful physical exam should reveal evidence of insulin resistance (darkened and thickened skin at the base of the neck, armpits, or other skin folds) called Acanthosis Nigricans or AN. Further evaluation by a pediatric specialist may be required if any of these conditions are detected, often the assistance of a pediatric endocrinologist and pediatric nutritionist who are well versed in the conditions associated with childhood overweight, the causes, and treatment options.

Question: *Why are so many of our children overweight? What diet should I consider for my children if they are overweight?*

Answer: In order to understand how Americans became the most overweight people in the world (nearly 60% of us are overweight), we must recognize that the choices we make every day about what we eat and what we do with our time are the primary reasons for excessive weight gain. This “perfect storm” of lifestyle choices is responsible for the American overweight epidemic.

In the past 30 years, childhood (and adult) overweight has increased dramatically, too short a time for genetic factors to play a role for most people. Children are particularly vulnerable and appear to be following their parents in the premature development of diabetes, high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, sleep apnea, joint problems, disordered eating, poor self-esteem, and early death from cardiovascular disease, cancer, and stroke.

These are what we believe to be the characteristics of children who are at risk for overweight:

They consistently eat more than they require for normal growth and development.

They eat too fast, too much, and have lost the ability to recognize when they have had enough to eat. Forty percent of their daily calories are eaten away from home and nearly 1/3 of each day’s calories are consumed after dinner. Meals portions are too large and contain too many fats. Soft drinks (i.e., “pop”) are replacing milk and dairy products in their diets. Meals are skipped (often breakfast) but snacks are eaten throughout the day.

They are less physically active. Most watch more than 2 hours of television, computer, or video games each day, they seldom exercise, and they do not regularly participate in physical education class and organized sports.

Consistently eating more than is needed and not being physically fit leads to sustained weight gain. Small changes in diet and physical activity, sustained over time have large consequences in weight gain or loss. A dramatic illustration of this is the fact that adding or removing only one soft drink a day (about 120 calories) to the diet can result in nearly a 20-pound weight gain or loss in one year. Therefore, small changes in life-style (diet, physical activity, eating patterns) can result in continual maintenance of weight or weight loss (if required) in the very overweight child. Many overweight children do not require weight loss but rather the opportunity to grow into their weight and to become physically fit. Diets that restrict too many calories or nutrients (i.e. carbohydrate restricted diets) are not appropriate for children. Evaluation by health care providers (pediatrician, pediatric endocrinologist, and pediatric nutritionist) is often helpful in determining the cause of childhood overweight and treatment.