



## YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE HEALTH OF CHILDREN TIPS TO COMBAT TODAY'S CHILDHOOD OBESITY EPIDEMIC

Today, more children than ever before are significantly overweight. Why? Fast food, junk food, “super-sized” portions, computers, video games, a car-driven society – it’s a combination of trends creating a generation of young people who are overweight and under active.

### The Biggest Generation at-a-glance

- The rate of obesity in children has tripled in the past two decades.
- One out of five children today is overweight.
- Obese children have shown an alarming increase in the incidence of type 2 diabetes, previously known as “adult-onset diabetes,” meaning it usually does not affect children.
- Today, many obese/overweight children suffer from other high health-risk diseases rarely seen in childhood, including high cholesterol and high blood pressure, which are risk factors for heart disease.

### What You Can Do

Experts call today’s childhood obesity rates an *epidemic*. But unlike other epidemics, this one is not caused by germs. It is caused by the choices each of us makes. And we *can* make a difference. In addition to educating young people about the benefits of healthful nutrition and physical activity, we can also become advocates for healthy change. Parents, educators, community leaders, youth group leaders, children and teens are spearheading innovative programs all over the country to combat negative environmental influences and help improve this generation’s health and wellness.

### Youth Power: A Healthy Influence

Nutritional and physical education means teaching young people about healthy food choices, daily physical activity, and a balance of calories and exercise. But it is also about empowering youth to be advocates for healthy options in their schools and communities.

### Adding healthy choices to vending machines and school lunches

Students all over the country are forming grassroots campaigns to ensure that cafeterias and vending machines offer healthy food choices. Other groups are focusing on daily physical education in schools. *And it’s working*. Parents and adult mentors such as teachers and coaches are critically important to this success, supporting youth advocacy efforts to influence peers, families, churches, schools, communities and policy-makers.

### Helping Kids Be Healthy

It’s not always easy to get kids to put down the french fries and remote control and pick up an apple or a soccer ball!



Experts offer the following tips to encourage children and adults to live a healthier lifestyle:

- Guide your children to choose the foods and portions (amount) that are right for their level of activity. To maintain weight, you need to expend as many calories as you eat. To lose weight, you need to expend more energy than the calories you eat. A helpful interactive site that both adults and children can use is [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov).
- Encourage your school to offer nutritional lunch choices, healthy vending machine snacks and drinks, and daily physical education.
  - National programs such as ***Stir It Up America*** ([stiritupamerica.com](http://stiritupamerica.com)) help parents voice their support for legislation regarding healthful school nutrition and physical education/activity.
  - All across the country, parents, educators and students are banding together to make changes to school lunch programs, vending machine offerings and physical education. Search the Internet for “school nutrition” in your district to learn about local programs.
- Put limits on the amount of time children watch television and play video games. Experts recommend no more than two hours a day.
- Schedule daily physical activity (walking, bike riding, simply playing outside). Select activities your children enjoy and can incorporate into your daily lives. Children should get at least 60 minutes a day of moderate physical activity (including the activity they get at school).
- Appreciate and love your children regardless of their weight. Overweight children know they have a weight problem; they need support, acceptance and encouragement.
- Talk to children about their *health*, not their weight. Focus on the benefits of feeling good and being healthy because of smart food choices and physical activity.
- If you have an overweight child, gradually change your family’s physical activity level, food choices and eating habits. For example, turn off the television during meals. Prepare healthy meals on the weekends to reduce the temptation of fast-food restaurants. Take a walk after dinner.

### **If your child is overweight**

The CDC recommends these important guidelines to parents of an overweight child:

- Have a doctor or other health care professional determine if your child is overweight.
- Physicians often use Body Mass Index (BMI) – based on height and weight – to determine if a child is overweight.
- A physician will also consider your child’s or adolescent’s age and growth patterns to determine whether his or her weight is healthy.
- Many overweight children who are still growing will not need to lose weight, but health professionals may recommend that they reduce their rate of weight gain so they can “grow into” their weight.
- Your child’s diet should be safe and nutritious, and include the Recommended Dietary Allowances for vitamins, minerals and protein. A weight-loss diet should be low in calories (energy) only, not in essential nutrients. (Consult the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s food pyramid for children at [www.mypyramid.com](http://www.mypyramid.com))
- Even with extremely overweight children, weight loss should be gradual.
- Crash diets and pills are not recommended by many healthcare professionals for children. They can stunt growth and harm a child’s health.
- All weight-management programs for children should be supervised by a physician.



### **Dos and Don'ts** (source: [www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines](http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines))

In order to make a difference in the lives of children, we must be good role models ourselves. Here is a list of suggested Dos and Don'ts – because children *are* watching our every move!

#### **DO:**

- Eat meals as a family as often as possible.
- Eat a healthy breakfast; research shows this may be important in achieving and maintaining a healthy weight.
- Eat slowly and chew well. It takes 20 minutes for the brain to signal the body that it is full.
- Turn off the television when eating meals and snacks.
- Encourage children to eat when they are hungry – not bored or tired.
- Drink water and low-fat milk. Limit soft drinks, sports drinks and even fruit juice – which contain added sugar and up to 200 calories per serving!
- Prepare for healthy snacks by stocking cut-up veggies, fruit and low-fat dairy products in the refrigerator.
- Have children participate in planning meals, which often encourages them to try new things. Children need to learn self-discipline around food; overweight children need to discover how to manage their relationship with food. Helping out in the kitchen is a good learning tool.

#### **DON'T:**

- Put your child on a restrictive diet (unless physician-recommended and supervised). Restricting your child's diet or dictating foods can cause both mental and physical stress.
- Use food as a reward.
- Withhold food as a punishment
- Forbid fast-food restaurants, but do limit them. Once there, choose salads over french fries; low-fat milk over soft drinks.

### **Resources**

[www.healthierus.gov](http://www.healthierus.gov)

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

[www.health.gov](http://www.health.gov)

[www.obesity.org](http://www.obesity.org)

