

# childhood obesity: How big is the problem?

Published in Citiscapes Metro Monthly, July 2007 Issue

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Most people are aware that childhood obesity has become a problem, but few realize how quickly this has happened. Childhood obesity rates were fairly stable from 1960-1980, but since that time have doubled in preschoolers and teenagers and tripled in grade school children. Currently, Arkansas children have a 37.5 percent chance of being overweight or at risk to be overweight.

## **Q: Is my child overweight?**

A: Overweight in children is defined as a BMI (Body Mass Index) greater than the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile for age and sex. There are circumstances where BMI is not a reliable indicator of a problem and your doctor can help determine this.

## **Q: What are the complications of childhood obesity?**

A: We see many conditions directly related to childhood obesity including several diseases previously seen only in adults. These include: High Blood Pressure, High Cholesterol, Insulin resistance and Type 2 Diabetes, Bone and Joint problems, Sleep Apnea, Liver and Gallbladder disease, Skin Infections, Early Puberty and Polycystic Ovarian Disease, Depression and Anxiety Disorders, Increased Risk of Substance Abuse, and Eating Disorders.

## **Q: What causes obesity in childhood?**

A: Diet, activity levels, genetics, family lifestyle, and social/psychological factors all work together to increase the risk of becoming overweight or obese. If a child has one parent who is obese, his risk is 40%. If both parents are obese, the risk doubles to 80%. Often there have been long standing food issues in a family with an obese child, and success will depend on these being addressed openly. Rarely, there is a medical condition or medication causing the problem.

## **Q: What can I do to help my overweight child lose weight?**

A: Weight loss results from a negative energy balance – more energy needs to be used than is taken in. It sounds simple but anyone who has tried to lose weight knows it is not that easy. In children, it can be more difficult because they need extra nutrients to support their growth. Depending on the severity of the problem, I often center treatment around weight maintenance to allow inches to be added to the height without any extra pounds. This works especially well if a child has not gone through the rapid growth surrounding puberty. If weight loss is the goal, I recommend a goal of 2-4 pounds per month depending on the age of the child and the family situation. However, it is important to keep the focus on making a change to a healthy lifestyle rather than numbers on a scale. These changes should be made by the whole family and made for life.

## Tips to keep your family healthy

Here are some suggestions to help encourage a healthy weight in all members of your family.

- Lead by example. As parents, we are responsible for the food made available in our homes as well as the number of hours our TVs and computers are on.
- Don't single out one child as the problem. All members of the family need to be engaged in the process.
- Keep your fridge stocked with fresh fruits, berries, and veggies. Have it washed, cut up if necessary, and put in airtight containers so it will last all week.
- Focus on eating a whole foods diet, which is higher in nutrients and fiber while being lower in calories than processed foods.
- Take a weekly outing to the Farmer's Market this summer. Let your kids help you pick out the fresh produce you will eat that week.
- Limit eating at fast food restaurants to 1-2 times per month.
- Decrease the calories you drink, including soda, fruit juice (which is mostly sugar, even the 100% juice brands), whole milk, and sports drinks. I can usually eliminate 500 calories per day from a child's diet with this step alone.
- Don't use food as a reward, and discourage emotional eating whether it's done when happy or sad.
- Don't force children to clean their plate. Your job is to provide a well-balanced and healthy diet. Trust your child to know when he is full.
- Sit down for family meals. Less food is consumed in this setting than when in front of the TV or computer.
- Get up and move. It doesn't have to be an organized activity. Just pick something fun like playing games outside after dinner, going for a family bike ride, swim, or walk, or going on a nature hike. Children are much more likely to be active if they are having fun.
- Limit "screen time". Try going 1 week with just 30-60 minutes per day of TV or computer games and see how creative your kids become with their extra time.

For more useful tips, I recommend Ellyn Satter's book, *Your Child's Weight: Helping without Harming* (2005)

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