

Childhood Obesity: A Complex Issue

As a parent, you want the best possible health for your child. So does your pediatrician. When your child comes to see a pediatrician, for either a well visit or a sick one, we are always asking ourselves what we can do to keep your child healthy. An important step in understanding the health of your child is checking if they have excess weight. That's because excess weight - overweight or obesity - can impact their overall health.

In fact, we call obesity a chronic disease because it can affect every part of the body. It can even interfere with the way we feel hunger and fullness and process energy. Obesity often lasts into adulthood. It can result in other diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, nonalcoholic fatty liver disease, blood lipid (high cholesterol) problems, sleep apnea and orthopedic programs to name a few.

It is important to think of obesity as a disease that can be treated, much like asthma and other chronic conditions.

What Causes Childhood Obesity?

It is important to remember that the causes of obesity are not limited just to individual and family factors such as genetics, nutrition and activity. They also involve multiple, complex situations in the wider environment that can lead to obesity, such as:

- Unjust food systems and economic factors, which can make it hard for some families to access or afford healthy food choices, for example.
- Unsafe physical environments, which can limit opportunities for physical activity, exercise and active play.
- Sources of toxic stress such as exposure to racism. Toxic stress can affect the hormones that regulate weight, among other health effects.

How is a child diagnosed with overweight or obesity?

One of the measures we use to check for excess weight is the Body Mass Index, or BMI. The BMI is a calculation that compares your child's height and weight and lets us know if they are in a healthy range for their age and gender. The BMI itself does not tell us about their health inside their body. However, it is an outward sign of what can be happening inside their body.

If your child's BMI is outside their healthy range, this is referred to as overweight or obesity. Your doctor will want to explore and learn more. This is because extra weight can take a toll on the body. It can affect internal organs, causing inflammation and problems with the immune system and body chemistry, for example.

Obesity also impacts mental and emotional health. These effects are not visible from the outside. This is why your doctor will be asking you and your child questions about the way their body is functioning. They'll also gauge the body's health by ordering lab work and other tests. The goal of this evaluation is to make sure that your child is healthy inside.

We know that excess weight or high BMI is just a part of the puzzle. In some cases, children and adolescents with excess weight or higher BMIs are healthy on the inside. But the effects of excess weight or high BMI can progress, so your doctor will want to monitor these tests over time.

Obesity as a Chronic Disease

- **Why it's important to treat obesity early**

We need to work towards a better environment where all children and families can grow-up healthy. However, until we are able to create healthier environments it is important to know that treatment for overweight and obesity can work despite unhealthy environments.

Treatment of obesity and obesity-related diseases may be needed for many years. It requires an ongoing partnership with your child's doctor and attention to the disease through intensive health behavior and lifestyle treatment.

These can bolster your family's ability to stay healthy on the inside and address excess weight. In some cases, medication and metabolic and bariatric surgery may be recommended as the treatment.

- **Focus on health not body appearance**

It is important to say a word about body acceptance and weight bias and stigma. There is no place for blame or guilt about body shape or size. What is important is that our bodies function in a healthy way. Blaming someone for obesity is like blaming someone for having asthma. It is not helpful, frequently harmful and gets in the way of effective treatment.

Similar to other chronic diseases, the focus of any treatment should be on the overall health and quality-of-life factors important to your child and family. For example, treatment goals may include missing less school, participating in events such as walkathons, and improved self-esteem.

Your child's health is important to you as parents and to your child's pediatrician and measuring BMI and evaluating the health effects of obesity is part of keeping your child healthy.

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics Institute for Healthy Childhood Weight.

This resource was developed with a [healthychildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org) article written by Sandra Hassink, MD, FAAP and Sarah Hampl, MD, FAAP. The article is based on the 2023 American Academy of Pediatrics Clinical Practice Guideline on Evaluation and Treatment of Children and Adolescents with Overweight & Obesity. For the latest information, please visit www.healthychildren.org.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is an organization of 67,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of all infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

In all aspects of its publishing program (writing, review, and production), the AAP is committed to promoting principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

American Academy of Pediatrics 
DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®

 **healthychildren.org**
Powered by pediatricians. Trusted by parents.
from the American Academy of Pediatrics