

# Treatment for Obesity in Children and Teens

A rising number of kids carry excess weight, which can put their current and long-term health at risk in many ways. Fortunately, there are a variety of proven treatments for overweight and obesity in children and teens. Here's what families should know.

## Childhood obesity treatment: not one-size-fits-all solution

After several decades of research, we now have several good options to help children and teens with obesity. Which option is right for any individual child is based on a number of factors. These include the family's values and health goals, the child's age and health status, and the severity of the obesity. Deciding on the right treatment for a child should be a discussion between the child, family, the primary health care provider, and sometimes a child obesity specialist.

## Will my child or teen grow out of obesity?

The medical studies are clear that there is no real benefit to "watching and waiting" to see if children will outgrow obesity. Starting treatment promptly can prevent chronic health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol and from developing.

## Obesity treatment options for kids and teens

- **Behavioral and lifestyle treatment**

Weight treatment always includes behavioral and lifestyle treatment. Your doctor will talk to you about behavioral treatment options that support healthy habits. These may involve healthcare specialists, a community program or frequent visits with your doctor. However, some patients may benefit from additional treatment to reach a weight that protects them from long-term health problems.

- **Weight-loss medication and surgery**

Weight loss medications prescribed under the supervision of a qualified professional are a powerful tool in helping to treat obesity. For adolescents more severely affected by obesity, or those who are developing chronic health problems, weight loss surgery is a safe and effective option.

It is also important to seek out comprehensive treatment programs with experience prescribing medications and performing weight loss surgery procedures in children and teens. Medication or surgery does not replace high quality behavior and lifestyle treatment. You, your child and your child's doctor will together make the most informed decision regarding the best treatment plan for your family.

## What should we expect when starting obesity treatment?

First, you can expect that health providers and staff will treat your child and your family with respect, not blame or stigma. Overweight and obesity and the related health conditions are not simple problems. Genes, biology, environment, governmental policies and stress all contribute to a person's tendency to gain unhealthy weight.

Also keep in mind that obesity and overweight are chronic diseases, like asthma or diabetes. This means there is no quick "fix" or "cure." Treatments like lifestyle programs and medications will work while you are doing the treatment. However, stopping treatment often means regaining weight. You can expect the treatment will take time and will consist of multiple visits with healthcare providers and others.

## **Does obesity treatment cause eating disorders or other types of harm?**

High quality obesity treatment is safe. Children and adolescents who receive obesity treatment in a supervised and structured program show less disordered eating than those who do not get treatment. In fact, high quality obesity treatment is similar in approach and content to eating disorder treatment; both emphasize balanced, nutritious eating and a healthy relationship with food.

## **What are the main goals of obesity treatment?**

The goal of treatment for obesity and overweight is better health. The meaning of better health differs depending on the individual patient.

- Better physical health, which could mean lower blood pressure, better cholesterol levels or better endurance when physically active
- Improved weight, which could mean weight loss, weight maintenance or slower weight gain. Usually, doctors track some form of body mass index (BMI) for children and adolescents, but interpretation is individualized
- Improved quality of life: good self-esteem, ability to be physically active, to attend school and to interact with family and friends

## **Remember**

Obesity treatment is safe and effective. Talk with your doctor about partnering on a treatment plan that is right for you and your child.

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 Sarah Barlow, MD, FAAP and Sarah Armstrong, 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 Obesity. For the latest information, please visit [www.healthychildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org).

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