

Nutrition Matters

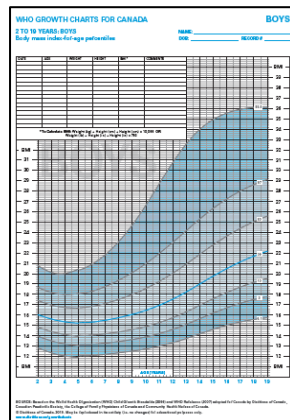
Nutrition Services, Community and Health Services

A parent's guide to children's weight

Children come in different shapes and sizes and grow at different rates. Sometimes a child gains weight before they grow taller and over time their height may catch up to their weight. Or perhaps your child has been overweight for a while.

The way your child grows depends mostly on genetics (how their mother and father grew). Healthy eating habits and regular physical activity help a child grow at a healthy rate, but won't change the body size or shape a child inherits from their parents.

If you think your child is overweight, talk to your child's doctor. They can check your child's growth history using a growth chart. This means checking not only their weight and height over time but their body mass index (BMI) as well. BMI is a ratio of weight to height. Just checking the weight is not enough. Using a growth chart can help to determine if your child is overweight.



If you have been told by your child's doctor that your child is overweight, there are some things you can do to help.

What should I do if my child is overweight?

Provide support and encouragement

It's important not to talk a lot to your child about their weight. Research suggests that too much "weight talk" at home may increase the risk for both obesity and eating disorders. Instead, help your child feel good about themselves by focusing on their strengths and skills. Make sure your child knows that you love them no matter what size body they have.

If you think that your child is eating because they are bored, stressed or as a way to deal with emotional problems, talk with them to find out what is bothering them. Listen to your child's concerns. Children need support, understanding and encouragement from their parents.

Don't put your child on a diet

A restrictive diet can interfere with a child's normal growth and development and is rarely recommended. Children are born knowing when they are hungry and when they are full. Pushing a child to eat less food usually backfires. Children who are afraid that they will go hungry become preoccupied with food and overeat when they have a chance. They may start to eat in secret when you're not watching.

How can I help my child have healthier eating habits?

As parents, you decide **what** foods and beverages to offer, and **when** and **where** your child will eat. That's it. Nothing else. The rest is up to your child. Let your child

choose what to eat and trust them to eat as much or as little as they want from the foods you have offered.

It's up to you to decide:

- **What** foods to offer
- **When** to offer meals and snacks
- **Where** your child will eat

Trust your child to decide:

- **Which foods** to eat
- **How much** to eat

Eat together

Research shows that families who eat together eat more healthy foods and less unhealthy foods.

These families are less likely to be overweight.



Let your family know that you are all going to have meals and snacks at set times and be more physically active so that you will all be healthy. Canada's Food Guide can help you plan your menus. For a print copy of *Canada's Food Guide*, call York Region *Health Connection* at 1-800-361-5653 (TTY 1-866-252-9933) or e-mail HC@york.ca.

Offer the same meals to everyone in the family so that you do not single out your overweight child. Turn off the television and have enjoyable conversations that do not focus on weight, food or how much anyone has eaten.

Tips for eating together

- Insist that everyone eat at the table and not elsewhere in the home (e.g., in front of the TV)
- Do not provide conditions with eating, e.g., you can only have dessert if you eat your vegetables
- Encourage everyone to stop eating when they feel comfortably full

- Let family members know that there is no need to eat between the set meal and snack times
- Once they leave the table, that's all until the next scheduled meal or snack
- If your child asks for a snack soon after they ate dinner, say "We just ate, but snack time will be soon." And it's all right to say, "Don't eat now, dinner is in 45 minutes"
- If your child or other family members are thirsty between meals and snacks, offer water

Provide regular scheduled snacks

Help your child be hungry, but not starving, at meal times by offering 2-3 planned snacks at regular times between meals. Snacks will give them enough energy to carry them through to the next meal.

Make snacks nutritious by including foods from at least two food groups. Let your child choose as much or as little as they want from the foods that you offer at snack times. Have your child sit down at the table to eat their snack. Here are some healthy snack ideas:

- Carrot sticks, graham crackers
- Whole grain cereal, milk
- Pita bread, hummus
- Canned peaches, yogurt
- Cheese, whole grain crackers
- Raisin toast, orange juice
- Smoothie - made with fruit, yogurt and milk



What about high-fat and high-sugar foods?

It's not a good idea to give children an unlimited amount of high-fat, high-sugar foods and beverages such as candy, chips, high-fat baked goods, fried foods, or large amounts of juice, pop or fruit-flavoured drinks.

If you have a lot of these types of foods in your house, your child is going to want them, and they may end up consuming too many calories. Also, they will be less interested in the nutritious foods you offer at meal or snack time.

However, not allowing children to have these types of foods isn't a good idea either. Children who aren't allowed to have these foods eat more of them when they get the chance, even if they are not hungry at the time.



If you have these foods in your home, here's what to do:

- Offer them with either a snack or meal, not between
- Offer some healthy foods along with less healthy food
- Avoid bribing or giving these foods as a reward, especially as a reward for eating the healthy foods
- Relax, healthy eating can include small amounts of these less healthy foods

“Everyday” and “sometimes” foods

Approach food choices and eating in a positive way. Avoid calling foods “good” or “bad” as the word “bad” can cause negative feelings such as guilt or shame. Let your child know that some foods are more nutritious than others, but all foods can be eaten and enjoyed. To help your child learn about healthy eating behaviours, you can call foods “everyday” and “sometimes” foods.

Be a good role model

Your child learns eating habits by watching others. If you or



other family members diet, talk a lot about their own or other people's body or weight or tend to overeat, your child may do the same. Eat when you are hungry, not when you are bored or stressed. Eat slowly and stop eating when you feel satisfied. Keep your portion sizes sensible.

If a relative or caregiver tells your child to eat less food than your child wants, ask this person to allow your child to serve themselves and to let them have more if they are still hungry. Also, ask them not to insist that your child eat everything on their plate.

Watch what your child is drinking

Although fruit juice is healthy, too much juice can provide too many extra calories. It's best to limit juice to 6 ounces (175 mL) a day for children 1-6 years of age and to 12 ounces (375 mL) for children 7 years of age and older. Pop and fruit-flavoured drinks are “sometimes” foods and should only be served on occasion. Always have water available and encourage your child to drink it regularly.

Too much milk can also provide extra calories. Children 2-8 years of age need 2 cups (16 oz or 500 mL) of 2%, 1% or skim milk or fortified soy beverage every day. They don't need more than this amount. Children and teens 9-18 years of age need 3-4 cups a day.

Be reasonable, but not restrictive about how much fat you use

Use only a small amount of non-hydrogenated margarine or oils like olive or canola when preparing foods. Instead of frying foods, try baking, barbecuing, steaming, broiling or stir-frying. Offer lower-fat milk such as 2%, 1% or skim, instead of homo milk. Offer some foods that are high in fat (e.g., cheese, nuts). As with all foods, let your child eat as much of the high fat food as they want.

Eat fast food less often

Families who regularly eat at fast-food restaurants eat too much fat and not enough fruit and vegetables. If your family eats in restaurants regularly, set a limit of one fried food per meal (e.g., French fries or chicken nuggets, but not both). Order milk (including chocolate milk), juice or water instead of pop or a milkshake.

How can I help my child be more physically active?

Overeating or poor eating habits aren't the only reasons why children become overweight. A lack of physical activity is another factor for many children. Children today are less active than ever before.

Here are some ways to help your child become more active:

- Reduce the time your child spends watching television or playing video or computer games. Don't allow TVs and computers in children's bedrooms
- Make sure your child has moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity every day such as skipping, swimming, playing in the park, and playing active games
- Consider your child's needs and feelings when helping them choose physical activities. Children stay active when they enjoy the activity. They won't stay active if the activity makes them feel bored, embarrassed or like a failure



- Plan regular physical activities that the family can do together such as bowling, throwing a Frisbee, raking leaves, and going for a walk or bike ride
- If your child is very young, have them show you how bunnies hop or birds fly
- Choose toys that encourage physical activity such as balls, skipping ropes, tennis rackets and bikes, keeping in mind your child's interests and skills
- Model positive behaviour by being active yourself

What if my child remains overweight?

It might take 6-12 months or longer before your child grows into their weight. If you follow the suggestions listed here,



you are making great progress. You are helping your child become healthier and fitter and grow in the way that's right for them!

As a parent, teach your child that what they look like is much less important than health, happiness and character. Assure your child that there is nothing wrong with being larger than other children their age.

Build your child's self-esteem by praising them and telling them often what their special talents and traits are. Most importantly, love and accept your child unconditionally. Whatever their size, your child can be healthy and active, and feel good about themselves.