

Nutrition Matters

Nutrition Services, Community and Health Services

I think my child is overweight... (for parents of children two years and older)

Children come in many shapes and sizes

Every child is unique. Like adults, children come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Children grow and develop at different rates. Sometimes a child gains weight before they grow taller. Over time, the child's height may catch up to their weight. On the other hand, perhaps your child has been overweight for a long time.

The way your child grows depends mostly on genetics. Healthy eating habits and regular physical activity help maintain a healthy weight, but won't change the body size or shape a child inherits from their parents.

The best way to know if your child is overweight is to ask your child's doctor, who will check their weight history, body build and growth.

What can I do if my child is overweight?

Make family meals healthy, so that no one family member is singled out. Offer the same meals to everyone in the family. Tell the whole family 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. Tell them that they can eat as much or as little as they want of the food that you provide at meal and snack times. Encourage them to stop eating when they are comfortably full. Let them

know that there is no need to eat between these set meal and snack times.

Make sure your child knows that you love them no matter what size body they have. Help your child feel good about themselves by focusing on their strengths and skills.

Should I put my overweight child on a diet?

No, definitely not! Children should not be put on a weight loss diet. A restrictive diet can interfere with a child's normal growth and development. Children are born with the ability to know when they are hungry and when they are full. If you try to control how much your child eats, they may lose that ability. As a result, this may cause your child to eat too much.

It's your job to decide what food to offer and to plan regular times to eat. It's your child's job to decide whether they want to eat and how much to eat from the foods you offer.

Parents and caregivers decide:

- What food is served
- When the food is served
- Where the food is served

Your child decides:

- Whether to eat
- How much to eat

Pushing a child to eat less food usually backfires. Children who are afraid that they will go hungry become preoccupied with food and overeat whenever they have a chance. They may start to secretly eat when you're not watching.

How do I know if my child is eating too much?

Don't assume that if your child is overweight, they must be overeating. A child who eats to satisfy their hunger is not overeating. Eating beyond the point that they feel full or drinking large amounts of juice, pop or fruit-flavoured drinks is overeating.

If your child eats or drinks food and beverages between meal and snack times, or if they eat a lot of candy,

potato chips, high-fat baked goods or fried foods, this could also lead to excess weight.



How can I help my child have healthier eating habits?

Be a good role model

Your child learns how to eat by watching others. If you or other family members diet or tend to overeat, your child may do so as well. 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. Canada's Food Guide can help you plan and judge your food portions. For a copy of Canada's Food Guide, call York Region Health Services *Health Connection* at 1-800-361-5653.

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

Limit the amount of high-fat and high-sugar foods available

As a parent, it's your responsibility to have a variety of healthy foods in your home. If you have a lot of high-calorie snacks such as chips and cookies available, your child is going to want them. It's best to limit these kinds of foods in the home. Otherwise, you will find yourself in battles with your child about when they can have them and how much they can have.

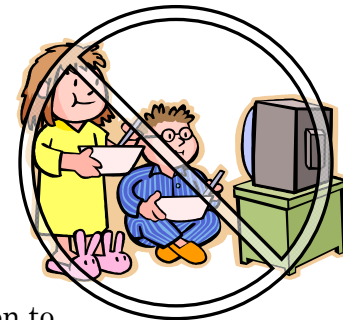
It's okay to bring small amounts of candy, cookies, chips, pop and other high-sugar and high-fat foods into your home occasionally. Let your child eat them in moderation. Once these foods have been eaten, don't replace them right away.

Don't go to the extreme of forbidding these types of foods, because this will make them especially desirable to your child. When parents restrict certain foods, children want them more than if they had not been restricted.

Don't allow your child to watch TV while eating

Eating in front of the television or computer makes it hard for children and adults

to pay attention to their feelings of fullness. This may lead to overeating.



Watch how much your child drinks

Although fruit juice is healthy, too much juice can be a major source of calories in children's diets. It's best to limit juice to six ounces (200 mL) a day for children one to six years old and to 12 ounces (375 mL) for children seven and older. You can dilute the juice with water to make it go further. Save pop and fruit-flavoured drinks for occasional treats only. Always have water in the fridge and encourage your child to drink it regularly.

Milk can also be a major source of calories in children's diets. Canada's Food Guide recommends that children aged two to eight get 2 cups (500mL) of lower-fat milk (2%, 1%, skim) or fortified soy beverage every day. Children and teens aged nine to 18 years old need three to four cups.

Eat together as a family

Try to eat at least one meal together every day. Research shows that families who eat together tend to eat healthier.



During mealtime, turn off the TV. Have enjoyable conversations, with no nagging or complaining.

Eat fast food less often

When your family eats fast food, set a limit of one fried food per meal (e.g., French fries or chicken nuggets, but not both). Order milk, juice or water instead of a pop or milkshake.

Provide support and encouragement

If you think that your child is eating as a way to handle boredom, stress or 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.

What kind of meals and snacks are best?

Provide three meals and two or three snacks spaced at regular times

Help your child be hungry, but not famished, at meal times by offering planned snacks between meals. Snacks will give them enough fuel to carry them through to the next meal. Don't let your child have food or beverages between the set meal and snack times. If your child is thirsty between meals and snacks, offer water. It's all right to say, "Don't eat now, dinner is in 45 minutes."

Make snacks nutritious and filling 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 provide at snack times. Have your child sit down at the table to eat their snack.

Here are some healthy snack ideas:

- Sliced apples and graham crackers
- Pita bread and hummus
- Unsweetened canned peaches and yogurt
- Cheese and crackers
- O-shaped oat cereal and milk
- Raisin toast and orange juice
- Banana smoothie



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

Offer lower-fat milk such as 2%, 1% or skim, instead of homo milk. Use only a small amount of margarine or oil on vegetables. Instead of frying foods, try baking, barbecuing, broiling or stir-frying. Offer some foods that are high in fat. As with all other food, allow your child to eat as much or as little of the high fat food as they want.

How can I help my child be more active?

Overeating or poor eating habits aren't the only reasons why children become overweight. A lack of physical activity is a more important factor for many children. Children today are less active than ever before. Here are some ways to help your child become more active:

- Model positive behaviour - be physically active yourself
- Reduce the time that your child spends watching television or playing video or computer games to less than 90 minutes a day
- Try to have your child spend at least 90 minutes every day on moderate physical activities such as playing in the park, skipping, swimming and playing soccer
- Consider your child's needs and feelings when helping them choose physical activities. When children engage in activities they enjoy, they're much more likely to stay with them. If they experience failure, embarrassment, or boredom, they will be discouraged from wanting to participate
- Plan regular physical activities that the family can do together such as bowling, raking the leaves, going for a walk, or bike riding after supper



- 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



For a copy of Canada's Physical Activity Guide, call York Region Community and Health Services *Health Connection* at 1-800-361-5653.

What if my child remains overweight?

It might take six months, a year, or longer before your child grows into their weight. If you follow the recommendations listed here, you are making great progress! You are helping your child become healthier and fitter. Because body size is also determined by genetics, many heavy children will never be "thin."

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. Avoid talking about your own or other people's weight.

Do all you can to build your child's self-esteem. Praise your child. Tell them often what their special talents and traits are. Most importantly, love your child unconditionally. Whatever their size, your child can be a healthy, active person who feels good about themselves.