

Parents: Help kids live at a healthy weight

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

It's everywhere in the news these days: Today's kids are suffering from overweight and obesity, and it is affecting their health and their future.

Diseases previously associated with overweight adults, such as type 2 diabetes, are increasingly showing up in children. About 17 percent of U.S. children ages 2 to 19 are overweight, and those extra pounds have serious health consequences for them, "both while they are children and for their future health as adults," says Marc Jacobson, MD, a spokesman for the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Extra pounds pack psychological fallout, too, such as low self-esteem, depression and learning and behavioral problems.

If you think your child is putting on too much weight, take her or him to the doctor. There are some important measurements, such as body mass index, that a doctor can take to tell whether kids are overweight. But don't wait until there's a problem to think about the national epidemic of childhood obesity. There



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>> For more tips, visit www.aap.org/obesity and www.cdc.gov/overweight

cook with less fat and choose and prepare foods with less salt. By the way, the salt shaker doesn't belong at the dinner table, but your family does. Studies show that families that gather at the table for a shared meal tend to consume more nutritious meals and fewer fried foods and sodas. Serve reasonably-sized portions and help your children recognize the fullness signals that tell them to stop eating.

are a lot of things parents and caregivers can do to encourage healthy weights for children.

Health tip

Be a role model! Kids learn from their parents' behaviors, so make healthy choices in your own everyday life.

Model good behavior

A parent's or caregiver's job is to demonstrate — not dictate — good eating habits, so listen up!

Munching on potato chips while you're waiting for dinner to come out of the oven doesn't model good behavior, but munching on a carrot or celery stick does. If you eat a variety of foods that are high in fiber and low in fat and sugar, your kids will learn to like those foods too. So don't just offer them nutritious foods — let them see you eating them!

Jacobson says there are three key ways to model good behavior: "One, know your body mass index. Two, be sure you have regular physical activity yourself. And three, eat right, meaning decrease the frequency of fast foods, increase fruits and vegetables, and decrease soda and other sweetened beverages."

Being a good role model extends into every area of your life. If your kids see that you are physically active and having fun, they'll be more likely to be active throughout their lives. And practice what you preach: If you take the TV out of your child's bedroom, get rid of the one in your bedroom, too.

Encourage healthy habits

Parents and caregivers play a huge role in shaping kids' eating habits. Serve fruits and vegetables with every meal and limit your family's consumption of sugar and saturated fat.

Always serve a variety of healthy foods,

The lunch bunch

Making a healthy home-packed lunch starts in the grocery store. Most cheeses contain saturated fat, so use them sparingly. The best choices for protein-packed lunches are chicken, turkey, lean ham, low-fat lunch meats and tuna packed in water. Make sandwiches with whole-grain bread instead of white bread. Breads that list whole wheat as the first ingredient are loaded with fiber, B vitamins and iron.



Include at least one serving of fruit in your child's lunch, and be creative with vegetables. Garnish sandwiches with grated carrots or cucumber instead of just lettuce.

Facts on snacks

Poor snack choices can pack on pounds, so steer clear of sugary snacks or sodas. Some healthy, easy snacks are dried fruit, granola, trail mix, celery and carrot sticks, whole-grain crackers, apple slices, whole-wheat pretzels, low-fat yogurt, whole-wheat fig bars, rice cakes and air-popped popcorn. Instead of ice cream, try serving fat-free frozen yogurt or sorbet.

While everything can be enjoyed in moderation, limiting intake of snacks that are high in fat, sugar or salt can help your children develop healthy habits. Allow your kids to eat those items sometimes, so that they truly will be treats.



Make playtime family time

As you look for ways to get your kids away from the computer and outside to play, be sure to include the rest of the family. For example, consider getting a family membership to the gym.

Most children need at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity every day. Involve the whole family in activities like biking, roller-skating, hiking or basketball. And make a list of creative ways to incorporate activity, such as playing miniature golf or walking to the library together.

