

Obesity is weighty problem for youngsters

The national news is abuzz with this country's fight against obesity—adult and childhood obesity alike. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, obesity rates among children younger than five, even, have doubled in the last two decades.

Additional research has shown that overweight toddlers are showing early signs of health problems, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and cholesterol, heart disease, and joint problems—all of which were unheard of in children so young. And, studies show that overweight youngsters are more likely to be overweight teens and adults.

Doctors blame the growth in childhood obesity on less active lifestyles and poor eating habits.

“Children begin forming their eating and lifestyle habits in childhood,” says a Finnish doctor who conducted a study on childhood obesity and fat intake. “This is why children need to start early—once they begin eating solid foods—eating a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and good fats found in fish, nuts, seeds, and oils from plants, rather than in many processed foods, which are also high in calories and sugar.”

Teaching children to follow a low-fat diet will be effective when they reach their teen years and begin to eat more meals outside of the home, he adds. “Children will be in the habit of choosing healthier foods, even when they are not eating at home.”

The alarming rate of preschoolers' growing waistlines prompted the United States Department of Agriculture to launch a Web site last October, MyPyramid for Preschoolers, designed specifically for parents and caregivers to provide individualized nutrition guidance for children ages 2-5. The site allows parents to customize a pyramid to get detailed information about what and how much to feed their children based on their ages, gender, and activity level.

“We're giving a helping hand to families so they can help their kids to eat a more nutritious diet,” says Brian Wansink from the USDA. “What I find personally most helpful with my two preschoolers is how to talk with them about what to eat and tips on how to have fun with my kids around the dinner table.”

Visit <http://MyPyramid.gov> to customize a food pyramid for your child and learn about several real-life strategies provided to help parents introduce new food to preschoolers, deal with picky eaters, and encourage children to eat healthy foods.

They are what they eat

One of the best ways to encourage healthy development and to prevent children from becoming overweight is to begin teaching positive attitudes about eating and physical activity from the time they are born. Here are some suggestions on how parents can help instill good nutritional habits at each stage of development.

- **Birth through the toddler years.** The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that babies be exclusively breastfed or given an iron-fortified formula from birth to six months of age. The nutrients contained in breast milk or formula provide babies with the essential vitamins and minerals they need to grow at a healthy rate.

When babies are introduced to solids, typically around six months (some doctors suggest earlier while others suggest waiting longer; check with your child's pediatrician), iron-fortified, single-grain cereals such as rice or barley are recommended. As fruits and vegetables are introduced to your child's diet, be sure to offer babies a wide variety, but heed the general rule of introducing one new food no sooner every four days. Doing this will help pinpoint any allergic reactions and digestive issues a new baby food may cause.

As babies get older and learn to gum, chew, and swallow small lumps and bumps, their food should continue to be a rainbow of fruits and veggies, lean meats, and complex carbohydrates.

Up until age two, the AAP recommends that children who drink cows' milk should have the full-fat version of this and other dairy products. Low-fat versions at this age do not offer the fat and fatty acids children need for healthy brain, vision and nerve development. After age two, however, lean and lower-fat versions of dairy products are recommended by pediatricians.

- **18 months to 3 years old.** With so much to see, touch, and explore, many toddlers have little interest in slowing down long enough to eat a meal. Don't panic if your little one doesn't devour everything on his lunch or dinner plate. Have a stash of healthy snacks close by to keep your busy one fueled throughout the day. Try to keep individual-sized containers or baggies of whole-wheat crackers or cereal, pretzels, toddler-friendly fruits and veggies, such as melon chunks and apple slices, and cucumber circles and baby carrots on hand. Cheese sticks and yogurt also pack a big nutritional punch. Offer your children water to drink throughout that day rather than sugar juices or sodas. If you provide your child with juice, aim for 100 percent fruit juice and limit consumption to four to six ounces a day.

As your children grow and develop preferences for foods, your once-eager eater may suddenly become a picky eater. This doesn't mean you should stop introducing new, healthy food choices. Just go slow. Experts say it can take a toddler up to 10 introductions of a new food before giving it a try. Set the example by eating healthy foods yourself, then offer children small bites of food you eat along with their own favorites, but don't make a big deal about whether they eat them or not. If new foods are within your child's reach, they are more likely to try them when they are ready to expand their diets.

- **Ages 3 to 5.** As they grow, children become more independent. Therefore, a great way to encourage healthy eating at this age is to involve children in the meal process—from helping decide what to prepare, making a grocery list, shopping for food, preparing the meal, and serving themselves. If your children feel proud that they helped assemble the tossed salad or counted out the sweet potatoes at the grocery store, they just might eat them, too. Search for recipes together in these kid-friendly books: *Mom & Me Cookbook* by Annabel Karmel, *Salad*

People and More Real Recipes: A New Cookbook for Preschoolers and Up by Mollie Katzen, and *Children's Quick and Easy Cookbook* by Angela Wilkes.

Good nutrition and physical activity go hand-in-hand

As important as good nutrition is, it needs to partner with physical activity in order to help young children grow and be as fit as they can be.

“Even children with wholesome diets can become overweight and out of shape if they don’t burn the fuel they take in,” says one pediatrician.

Young children who enjoy movement and play tend to stay active throughout their lives. Staying fit can help improve children’s self-esteem—even very young children can become self-conscious or be teased if they are overweight and can’t keep up physically with their peers. Regular physical activity will also decrease the risk of breathing problems and sleep apnea, which commonly afflict overweight youngsters.

A few years ago, the AAP release a position statement on physical activity and childhood obesity, which called for the promotion of unorganized free play time for pre-school aged children. It stated that children should be engaged in physical activity for at least one hour a day, if not more, and screen time—including TV, computers, and electronic games—should be limited to less than two hours a day.

“Fortunately, kids are naturally active, and I find that I don’t have to tell my children how to get moving,” says a father of a two and four year old. “It’s just really important that we, as parents, provide the time and safe environment for our children to play in. Our children and their imaginations will do the rest.”

All the physical activities that kids do naturally—run, slide, skip, jump, and scoot around—have the added benefits of strengthening the muscles they will need to use in school when learning such skills as reading and writing. Unfortunately, teachers who work with young children are finding that more and more children are beginning school without the proper strength and physical development to take on new learning challenges. This leads to such problems as an inability to hold a pencil properly, slouching due to an inability to hold the body upright for lengths of time or a lack of ability to hold the head upright and make proper eye contact with teachers and classmates.

Get physical during family time

Fall is a wonderful time to get outside and enjoy the beauty of nature. When you exercise regularly on your own or with your children, you are a positive role model for fitness. Here are some ideas for fun activities designed to keep families moving together:

- Raking the leaves doesn’t have to be a chore. Encourage your children to help you rake leaves into piles with their own tools. Getting to jump into a huge pile afterwards is great motivation. Bagging and helping haul the leaves to the curb also provides a heart-healthy workout.

- Take a nature walk to look for all the signs of the changing season (e.g., colorful leaves, squirrels and chipmunks gathering acorns, frost on the ground).
- Go apple and/or pumpkin picking. A hike through the fields looking for just the right pumpkin or your favorite type of apple tree and then carrying and hauling—or rolling—your precious finds to the car are fun and active ways to spend a fall afternoon. Some farms also have corn mazes that you and your children can race through.
- Don't forget the parks and playgrounds. Summer might be gone, but the weather is still good for a trip to the park to kick around a soccer ball or play catch. The swings, slides, and seesaws are still a main attraction at playgrounds, too.