

Helping children maintain a healthy weight

As in many other developed countries in the world, children in Australia are getting fatter. Around 20 to 25 per cent are now overweight or obese, and this can harm their future health. Overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults and have a higher risk of serious problems like heart disease, diabetes and some cancers.

What causes weight problems?

Eating too many foods which are high in fat is one reason, but lack of physical activity is another important cause. Our modern lifestyle means we drive rather than walk, and rely on appliances to do work for us. Thanks to remote control, we don't even have to move from our seats to change TV channels or open the garage door. Many children spend increasing hours in front of the TV or computer instead of playing outdoors. This lifestyle may be convenient – but it's not healthy.

How can parents encourage children to eat healthy foods?

Many parents find it difficult to limit their children's intake of sweets, fatty snack foods and takeaway foods, especially when children say their friends are allowed to eat them. Here are some ideas:

- Don't forbid these foods entirely or call these foods 'bad' – the idea that things are 'bad' or forbidden can make them more desirable. Make it clear that these foods are okay sometimes, but not every day.
- Provide a variety of healthy foods at home. Include plenty of breads, rice, noodles, pasta and other cereal foods, dried peas and beans, vegetables, fruit and moderate amounts of low fat dairy foods, lean meat, poultry (with the skin removed) and fish.
- Avoid foods with 'hidden' fat. As well as foods that are obviously fatty (eg meat with visible fat or foods fried in fat), other foods such as pastries, cakes and sweet biscuits are also high in fat.
- Encourage kids to snack on healthy, high fibre foods like bread, fruit bread or fruit by having them within easy reach on the table or kitchen bench. Children tend to eat what they can see. If there's a packet of sweet biscuits or chips on the kitchen bench they'll eat them – but if there's a bunch of grapes or some bananas there, they'll eat those instead.
- Try and ensure children eat breakfast. Leaving for school on an empty stomach means children are more likely to snack on chips or sweets later. It's better to start the day with breakfast cereal, fruit and milk, bread with cheese, yogurt and fruit, or leftovers from dinner, for instance. No time for breakfast? Give them something to eat on the way.

Be an active family

Think of ways to be active together, such as

- Playing ball games in the backyard, at the park or beach
- Going for walks
- Finding a sport or other physical activity you all enjoy – swimming, surfing, riding bikes, gardening, hiring a canoe, going camping

Keep your kids moving

Limit the hours children spend in front of the computer or TV. Find other interests they can enjoy that keep them more active. If they're not interested in team sports, they may enjoy drama, dancing, martial arts or lifting weights, for instance. Where possible, get them to walk to school rather than drive them (maybe arrange with other parents in your area to take turns walking children to school). Encourage children to do chores around the house – and praise them for their help.

Set a good example

Parents who are physically active and enjoy a wide variety of healthy foods themselves are less likely to have children with weight problems.

Finding more help and information

Concerned about weight problems in the family? Your doctor can refer you to a dietitian in your area.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.