

# Young Heavyweights

## Obese vs. Overweight



A growing number of children are tipping the scales in doctor's offices across North America. According to the Canadian Paediatric Society, childhood [obesity](#) has tripled in this country between 1981 and 1996. And the number of obese children in the United States has increased by 20% over the last ten years. Overweight children have a high risk of becoming overweight adults and developing serious health conditions such as [Type 2 diabetes](#), [high blood pressure](#) and [stroke](#).

There's a difference, however, between an obese and overweight child. If your child is overweight, he or she may not necessarily be obese. A child who is overweight simply has a body mass index (BMI) that is above the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile for his or her age. Since BMI doesn't measure body fat directly, it's very possible to be overweight but not obese. If your child is very athletic or has a significant amount of muscle mass—and not excess body fat—there's no real need to be concerned about his or her weight. However, a great majority of overweight children are obese because of the excess body fat they're carrying around and weight loss should be of the utmost concern.

## Your Child's BMI

Dr. Danielle Grenier, medical affairs officer of the Canadian Paediatric Society, says "tracking a child's BMI is good, but it's not practical to do so in every case since it's not a very accurate measurement of obesity in children like it is in adults. Since all children's body frames are different, tracking a child's height and weight on a growth curve is a very good way to see if the child is leaning towards the heavy side."

If you're concerned about your child's BMI, keep these tips in mind before putting your child on a crash diet:

- BMI is only a guideline. It does not measure bone, fat or muscle.
- BMI values considered "appropriate" increase with age.
- There is no "right" BMI value for any single child at any age.
- BMI values should not be compared between children.
- A high or low BMI value isn't always cause for concern.
- If you have concerns about your child's weight, see a physician.

## Help Your Child Lose Weight

If you have a child who needs to lose weight—it's not just your child's issue—it's your whole family's issue. "It's important to get the whole family involved," says Grenier. "The eating habits of the entire family need to change for the overweight child to be successful at losing weight." Part of helping your child shed those extra pounds can be as simple as being aware of appropriate portion size. Many parents seem to think that more of a good thing is better. So extra servings of milk and juice can't hurt. On the contrary, too many calories of anything will pack the weight on. "Too much milk and juice can actually be a problem even though these are good sources of nutrients in the right portions," says Grenier. "I encourage parents to know what the right portions are and to get physically active as a family."

As an adult, you know there's no quick fix to losing weight, and the same goes for kids. It requires a long-term approach in lifestyle and eating habits that need to be part of your family's daily routine. But it *can* be done. Here are some tips on how to do it:

- **Make the issue a family issue.** It's important for the entire family to be on board with a common goal concerning health. Getting your child to change his or her attitude towards the benefits of being healthy will be difficult if one parent pushes healthy nutrition and the other sits around and eats cookies every day.
- **Focus on health goals instead of physical appearance goals.** Always try to emphasize the health benefits of exercise including mental strength and de-emphasize a desired physique. Remember that body shape has a lot to do with genetics and even if your child will never have a model's body he or she can still be physically fit.
- **Increase your family's activity level.** Cut down on the amount of time spent watching television, surfing the net and eating out. Create opportunities to get outside and be more active such as walking to taking a family bike ride. Everyone will feel better.
- **Decrease the availability of unhealthy food choices in your home.** It's not necessary to demonize junk food—just make sure to limit the amount you keep in the house. Substitute chips and cookies with fresh fruits and veggies.
- **Be supportive.** Losing weight is extremely hard to do without some sort of support from friends and family. So make sure to be supportive of your child and provide a lot of encouragement.