



Preventing Childhood Obesity: 6 Things Families Can Do

KEY POINTS

Childhood obesity is a complex disease with many contributing factors, including genetics, eating patterns, physical activity levels, and sleep routines. Compared to children with healthy weight, children with obesity are at a higher risk for asthma, sleep apnea, bone and joint problems, type 2 diabetes, and other health issues. Although there is no one solution, there are many ways parents and caregivers can help children have a healthy weight and set up lifelong healthy habits.



Why it matters

About 1 in 5 American children have obesity. Compared to children with healthy weight, children with obesity are at a higher risk for asthma, sleep apnea, bone and joint problems, type 2 diabetes, and risk factors for heart disease such as high blood pressure.

Obesity also has an impact on medical costs. Compared to children with healthy weight, total medical expenditures for children with severe obesity are \$909 higher each year.

Children with obesity are more likely to have obesity as adults. Adults with obesity have higher risks for stroke, [many types of cancer](#), heart disease, type 2 diabetes, premature death, and mental illness, such as clinical depression and anxiety.

Factors that influence obesity include genetics, eating patterns, physical activity levels, access to health care, and sleep routines. Also, conditions where we live, learn, work, and play can make healthy eating and getting enough physical activity difficult.

Though there is no one solution to addressing obesity, there are many ways parents and caregivers can help children have a healthy weight and set up lifelong healthy habits at home.

Here are ways families can help prevent obesity.

1. Model a healthy eating pattern

Offer a variety of fruits and vegetables throughout the day. Frozen and canned fruits and vegetables are often less expensive than fresh and are still good for you. Look for low sodium or no salt added vegetables and fruits packed in 100% fruit juice.

Adopting [healthy eating patterns](#) as a family helps children reach and maintain a healthy weight as they age. Eating a variety of vegetables and fruits, whole grains, lean protein foods, and low-fat and fat-free dairy products follows [nutrition guidelines](#) [PDF](#) [↗](#) and sets [children](#) and [adults](#) up for optimal health.

Help kids [rethink their drink](#) by replacing sugary drinks, such as soda, fruit drinks, and flavored milk, with water, 100% juice, or plain low-fat milk.

Hunger Hotline

For information about meal sites, food banks, and other services near you, call 1-866-3-HUNGRY (or 1-877-8-HAMBRE for Spanish). Hours: 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. ET, Monday – Friday.

2. Move more as a family

Physically active youth have stronger muscles and bones, better cardiovascular fitness, and lower body fat than those who are inactive. Children aged 3–5 years should be physically active throughout the day. Children aged 6–17 years need at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day.

Help your children [move more](#) and meet the [physical activity recommendations](#) by making it a family affair. Walking the family pet before and after school, riding bikes, and having races in the yard all count toward physical activity. Active chores, such as washing the car, vacuuming a room, or raking leaves, also count.

3. Set consistent sleep routines

Good sleep helps prevent type 2 diabetes, obesity, injuries, and problems with attention and behavior. Children who don't get enough sleep are at risk for unhealthy weight gain. Researchers are still trying to learn how sleep is linked to weight gain. Some reasons might include that lack of sleep can cause a child to eat more or to be less physically active because of to lack of energy.

[Preschoolers need 10–13 hours of sleep per day](#), including naps. Children 6–12 years old need 9–12 hours of uninterrupted sleep a night, and youth 13–17 need 8–10 hours. Staying with a consistent sleep schedule, including on weekends, can [help children sleep better](#).

Keep Reading:

[How Much Sleep Do I Need?](#)

4. Replace screen time with family time

During childhood, too much screen time can lead to poor sleep, weight gain, [lower grades in school](#), and poor mental health. Reducing screen time can free up time for family activities and can remove cues to eat unhealthy food.

Turning off screens an hour before bed and removing screens from children's bedrooms can help reduce screen time and improve sleep. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends creating a [family media plan](#) with examples of ways to reduce screen time.

5. Support obesity prevention in Early Care and Education

About 3 in 5 children birth through age 5 who are not yet in kindergarten are in a nonparental care arrangement at least once a week. The number of children in [Early care and education \(ECE\) settings](#) makes them among the best places outside the home to help young children build a foundation for healthy living. High-quality ECE programming can have a positive impact on a child's social-emotional wellbeing, educational achievement, health, and socioeconomic outcomes later in life.

Look for ECE settings supporting [healthy infant feeding, healthy eating, physical activity, and screen time limits](#). When looking for ECE programs for your child, ask about policies and practices related to breastfeeding and feeding breast milk to infants, nutrition standards for the food served, access to outdoor physical activity during the day, and how much time the child will spend daily in front of a screen.

6. Find a Family Healthy Weight Program

If you are concerned about your child's weight, talk with their health care provider. They can assess the health risks related to excess weight. If your child has overweight or obesity, your health care provider may refer you to a [family healthy weight program](#) (FHWP). FHWPs are comprehensive, family-based lifestyle change programs to help children who are overweight or who have obesity make progress toward a healthier weight through positive behavior changes.

Resources

- [Tips to Support Healthy Routines for Children and Teens](#)
- [Good Nutrition Starts Early](#)
- [Water and Healthier Drinks](#)
- [Making Physical Activity Part of a Child's Life](#)
- [How Much Physical Activity do Children Need?](#)
- [Child and Teen BMI Calculator](#)
- [Adult BMI Calculator](#)

SOURCES

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