

## Helping Children Manage Their Weight Requires Small Changes Over Time

By R. Nathan Landefeld, MD

*Q: My 11-year-old daughter is putting on a lot of weight. I try to help her eat healthy, but she doesn't get much exercise. What can I do to help her?*

*Answer:* The first step in dealing with an obese child is a visit to the child's pediatrician. While metabolic and endocrine problems contribute to only a tiny percentage of obese children, it's important to rule them out. Also, your child's doctor may request testing for diabetes and cholesterol problems. They also can help formulate a plan for weight loss.

Obese children should avoid fad diets, as these are generally quite limited in variety and, therefore, short-lived. Concentrate on consuming a variety of low-calorie, high-"value" foods, such as fruits and vegetables, high fiber carbohydrates, and lean meats. Parents should be aware that many obese children drink a large portion of their calories in the form of soda, whole milk, juices, and sweet tea. Try substituting water, unsweetened drinks, and skim milk.

Eating meals together as a family also is important. Family meals are associated with children eating more fruits and vegetables, and less fatty foods and soda. This also can help children learn appropriate portions, which are often exaggerated in foods purchased outside the home. Remember to support your child through your own healthy eating habits – it's difficult for a child to eat a snack of apples when the rest of the family is eating ice cream!

Encourage your overweight child to become more physically active. This doesn't necessarily mean joining a health club or gym. One of the most important, easy things to do is limit TV, video games, and computer time. Also, encourage children to join a sports team, go to a pool, ride bikes, or simply go for a walk.

Studies have shown that today's children are more than twice as likely to be obese, compared with children from the 1960s. More than 15 percent of America's children were considered obese in a study from 2000, and that number is likely to have

grown since then. Being overweight can contribute to impaired self-esteem and limit a child's athletic abilities. If unchecked, obesity also can cause health issues such as high blood pressure, coronary vascular disease, osteoarthritis, liver disease, and diabetes.

Remember – the key to effective weight loss is small changes over long periods of time, so keep activities fun and varied so your child does not lose interest.

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