

OVEREATING IN CHILDREN AND TEENS

My child seems to eat all the time. Is that normal?

It depends. Children and teens may go through cycles. For example, they may eat more and gain a bit of extra weight right before a growth spurt in height. This type of weight gain usually passes quickly as the child continues to grow.

What are signs that my child may have a problem?

If you are concerned that your child may have an eating problem, observe his or her behavior and talk with your family doctor. Ask yourself the questions below. They can be signs of a problem.

- Have you noticed your child or teen sneaking food?
- Does your child seem embarrassed about eating?
- Is your child's overeating driven by a specific event or mood?
- Is your child's food craving specific? For example, a specific flavor of ice-cream, candy bar or salty snack? Emotional cravings generally involve a specific food or type of food. Physical hunger can be satisfied by many different foods.
- Do you suspect your child is experiencing [emotional eating](#)?

What can I do to encourage my child or teen to eat healthier?

As a parent or primary caregiver, you have a lot of power. Children and teens are much easier to influence than adults. Your child will follow your example, so strive to be a good role model. Teach your child how to eat healthy foods and stay active. Your guidance is important even for teens who may prepare their own snacks and meals and plan their own activities. Here are a few tips:

- Keep healthy snacks readily available, such as fruits like apples and bananas, and raw veggies like carrots and celery. Don't bring unhealthy foods into the home.
- Include plenty of low-fat proteins, vegetables and whole grains in the meals you make.
- Avoid fast-food dining.
- Choose the healthiest options available when at fast-food or sit-down restaurants.
- Limit time in front of the TV, computer or game station to no more than 1 to 2 hours every day.
- Encourage your child to be active. Aim for at least 1 hour of active play every day. Make physical activity a family affair by taking a walk, riding a bike or doing chores together.
- Be a good role model. Live what you teach by eating smart and exercising.

What about exercise?

Physical activity has many other benefits, including the following:

- It helps burn calories instead of storing them as body fat. This means it helps children maintain a healthy weight and reduces the risk of being overweight or obese.
- It helps keep blood sugar levels more balanced and in a normal healthy range. This is especially important for children who have or are at risk for diabetes.
- It lowers blood pressure and cholesterol levels.
- It helps make bones and muscles strong, and it builds strength and endurance.
- It relieves stress and improves sleep and mental health.
- It can boost self-esteem by helping children feel more confident and better about their bodies and appearance.

Regular exercise can also help prevent serious health problems in the future that are associated with overweight and obesity, such as heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, asthma, sleep apnea and some types of cancer.

How much exercise does my child need?

Children 2 years of age and older need at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day. This doesn't have to be done all at one time. Your child just needs to be active throughout the day, even if he or she gets exercise in shorter bouts of activity.

What can I do to encourage my child or teen to be more physically active?

Start by limiting screen time for the whole family. Screen time includes watching television or DVDs, playing video or computer games and surfing the Internet. These are sedentary activities, meaning they usually are done while sitting or standing still. Try to limit your child's total screen time to no more than 1 to 2 hours each day. And remember – you're a role model for your child. Set a good example by limiting your screen time too.

Also, encourage and promote physical activity. Find something your child likes, such as participating in team sports, dancing, playing outdoors or volunteering.

Should I put my child on a weight-loss diet?

No, not without first talking to your family doctor. Children need to take in enough calories and nutrients to grow into healthy teens and adults. And because children grow at different rates, sometimes it's hard to tell if a child really has a problem with weight. Talk to your family doctor if you have concerns about your child or teen's weight.