Obesity - Helpful Hints for Parents of Children with Weight Problems

As kids spend more time in front of television, computer and video screens, their physical activity levels have decreased and their body weights have increased. Becoming overweight and obese is now affecting a lot of people (*epidemic*). The number of children who are overweight has doubled in the last 2 to 3 decades. Nearly 1 child in 5 is overweight. The increase is in both children and adolescents of all ages, races, and gender groups.

Obese children now have diseases like type 2 diabetes that used to only occur in adults. Overweight kids tend to become overweight adults. This puts the child at greater risk for heart disease, high blood pressure and stroke as an adult. But perhaps more hard on an overweight child than the health problems is the social discrimination. Children who are teased a lot can develop low self-esteem and depression.

CAUSES

There are many causes of obesity.

- Genetics.
- Eating too much and moving around too little.
- Certain medications such as antidepressants and blood pressure medication may lead to weight gain.
- Certain medical conditions such as hypothyroidism and lack of sleep may also be associated with increasing weight.

Almost half of children ages 8-16 years watch 3 to 5 hours of television a day. Kids who watch the most hours of television have the highest rates of obesity.

If you are concerned your child may be overweight, talk with their doctor. A health care professional can measure your child's height and weight and calculate a ratio known as body mass index (BMI). This number is compared to a growth chart for children of your child's age and gender to determine whether his or her weight is in a healthy range. If your child’s BMI is greater than the 95th percentile your child will be classified as obese. If your child's BMI is between the 85th and 94th percentile your child will be classified as overweight.

Your child’s caregiver may:

- Provide you with counseling.
- Obtain blood tests (cholesterol screening or liver tests).
- Do other diagnostic testing (an ultrasound of your child's abdomen or belly).

Your caregiver may recommend other weight loss treatments depending on:

- How long your child has been obese.
- Success of lifestyle modifications.
- The presence of other health conditions like diabetes or high blood pressure.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

There are a number of simple things you can do at home to address your child's weight problem:

- Eat meals together as a family at the table, not in front of a television. Eat slowly and enjoy the food. Limit meals away from home, especially at fast food restaurants.
- Involve your children in meal planning and grocery shopping. This helps them learn and gives them a role in the decision making.
- Eat a healthy breakfast daily.
- Keep healthy snacks on hand. Good options include fresh, frozen, or canned fruits and vegetables; low-fat cheese, yogurt or ice cream; frozen fruit juice bars; and whole grain crackers.
- Consider asking your health care provider for a referral to a registered dietician.

- Do not use food for rewards.
- Focus on health, not weight. Praise them for being energetic and for their involvement in activities.
- Do not ban foods. Set some of the desired foods aside as occasional treats.
- Make eating decisions for your children. It is the adult's responsibility to make sure their children develop healthy eating patterns.
- Watch portion size. One tablespoon of food on the plate for each year of age is a good guideline.
- Limit soda and juice. Children are better off with fruit instead of juice.
- Limit television and video games to 2 hours per day or less.
- Encourage play in sports or other forms of athletic activities. Try to get them interested in youth programs.
- Avoid all of the quick fixes. Weight loss pills and some diets may not be good for youngsters.
- Aim for gradual weight losses of 1/2 to 1 pound per week.
- Parents can get involved by making sure that their schools have healthy food options and provide Physical Education. PTA's (Parent Teacher Associations) are a good place to speak out and take an active role.

You are a role model for your kids. Children form habits from parents. Kids usually maintain them into adulthood. If your children see you reach for a banana instead of a brownie, they are likely to do the same. If they see you go for a walk, they may join in.

An increasing number of schools are also encouraging healthy lifestyle behaviors. There are more healthy choices in cafeterias and vending machines, such as salad bars and baked food rather than fried. Encourage kids to try items other than sodas, candy bars and French Fries. Some schools offer activities through intramural sports programs and recess. In schools where PE classes are offered, kids are now engaging in more activities that emphasize personal fitness and aerobic conditioning, rather than the competitive dodge-ball games you may recall from childhood.

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