



OBESITY SERIES

TIMELY INFORMATION

Human Nutrition, Diet & Health

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Childhood Obesity: Frequently Asked Questions

What are some of the factors that contribute to childhood obesity?

There are many factors that contribute to childhood obesity. They include physical inactivity, increased popularity of video games, lack of parental oversight, inadequate school lunch programs and fast-food advertising.

Physical Inactivity and Safety Concerns

Kids today, in general, exercise less than kids in earlier generations did. Now, parents have more safety concerns about letting kids play outside. Many children go straight from school to home, where they must stay inside until their parents get home. They have plenty of free time to watch TV, play video games and snack. Many suburban neighborhoods are even less kid-friendly because of their physical structures. There are many neighborhoods that don't even have sidewalks or nearby parks, so parents are reluctant to let their kids even walk alone to play with their friends.

Easy Access of High-Calorie Foods

In addition to physical inactivity, easy access to high-calorie foods significantly contributes to children gaining weight. Many school lunch programs offer unhealthy choices, but even the programs that offer healthy foods are not helping kids stay at a healthy weight – kids often refuse to eat the healthy food. Additionally, the availability of vending machine snacks can easily undo any benefits healthy school lunch programs promote. Schools are reluctant to remove vending machines because of the revenue they generate. Fast-food advertising, often targeted at children and teens, can promote the idea that fast food is healthy, because the actors are thin and happy.

How do I figure out what a healthy weight is for my child?

It is difficult to figure out the ideal weight for a child, because children grow so quickly. One way to estimate a healthy weight is to compare your child to standard weights of other children by age. For a true estimate, consult a doctor.

At what age should I start monitoring my child's weight?

Although it is usually not necessary to closely monitor your child's weight, it's a good idea to watch for signs that your child could become overweight as early as age 2. Many children who later become overweight show signs of it by late infancy.

How common is obesity? Are there more overweight kids now than there used to be?

Childhood obesity rates have tripled within the past 25 years. In the 1970s, approximately 5 to 6 percent of children struggled with being overweight; now, 15-16% of the children in the United States are overweight. Although some people believe that the increase of overweight children can be partially attributed to genetics, experts say that the changing social and cultural environment in the United States promotes a sedentary lifestyle. A sedentary lifestyle is the major reason for the increase in overweight and obese children.

Will my kid just grow out of being overweight?

Children rarely grow out of being overweight. Calorie control and physical activity are usually necessary for children to achieve a healthy weight.

Can medication help my child lose weight?

There are some medications available to assist in weight loss, but they are only intended as a last resort for children whose obesity is close to life-threatening. Children should never take medications to lose weight unless it is prescribed as part of an overall weight-loss plan as suggested by a doctor.

How fast does physical activity help with weight loss?

Although physical activity is a vital step to maintaining a healthy weight, it isn't effective as a weight-loss method on its own. Physical activity is a method to prevent weight gain and to maintain any weight that has been lost through controlling calories. Sometimes people believe that if they exercise, they can afford to eat more calories. However, most people overcompensate and end up eating far more calories than they burn off.

What are some other suggestions for losing weight?

The safest, most effective way to lose weight is to control calorie intake. Calorie control is a faster way to lose weight than increased physical activity alone. It is also important to eat foods that are high in nutrients and low in calories. These high-nutrient foods include vegetables, whole fruits, whole grains, and lean meats.

What are some of the health risks that overweight children face?

Overweight children are more susceptible to high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. Being overweight also puts stress on the body and can complicate routine surgical procedures.

What are some other costs associated with being obese?

Overweight children may have trouble adjusting socially. Although overweight children now are more accepted than they were in the past because of the increased numbers of overweight children, they are still sometimes teased, ridiculed and ostracized.

What is diabetes and what causes it?

Diabetes is the inability of the body to produce enough insulin to use sugar in the bloodstream and meet the needs of the body. There are two different types of diabetes. Although the specific causes are not known, experts believe that Type I diabetes is hereditary. With Type I diabetes, the pancreas does not produce any insulin and insulin shots are required. Type II diabetes occurs when the pancreas produces some insulin, but not enough to support the body's needs. Although obesity does not necessarily cause diabetes, there is a direct relationship between the two. (Unless specified, the following information refers to Type II diabetes.)

What's "adult-onset" diabetes?

Adult-onset diabetes is the old name for Type II diabetes. Type II diabetes used to be most common among older people who were overweight or whose pancreases failed to produce enough insulin for other reasons. It is now called Type II diabetes because of the higher incidence rates for younger people, especially those who are overweight.

Is Type II diabetes hereditary?

Type II diabetes is not necessarily hereditary, but people who have it in their families may be more susceptible to developing it. However, even if both of a person's parents have Type II diabetes, it does not mean that person will develop it as well.

Does childhood obesity always lead to diabetes?

No, but being overweight increases the risk of developing diabetes.

What are the warning signs for diabetes?

A few warning signs for diabetes include extreme and frequent thirst, frequent urination, tiredness, weight loss at its onset (for Type I because of the body's inability to use sugar as an energy source), and elevated blood sugar.

How do I help prevent my overweight child from getting diabetes?

The best way to prevent your child from getting diabetes is to encourage weight loss and increased physical activity and establish a high-nutrient diet with fewer calories. It is especially important to increase your child's level of physical activity.

Can diabetes be cured?

Diabetes cannot be cured, but it can be treated and its symptoms can be eliminated. Because some people become diabetic as a result of their obesity, their symptoms may disappear if they lose weight and adopt a healthy lifestyle. However, some people may become healthy again and continue to be diabetic and dependent on medication. It depends on the individual.

How is it treated?

Type II diabetes is treated with medications that stimulate the pancreas to produce more insulin. New drugs on the market can help people lose weight and absorb less food, but they also cause profuse diarrhea. The best treatment for diabetes is to treat the whole person – establish a healthy diet, lose weight and increase physical activity.

How does diabetes affect people socially?

The biggest social problems most Type II diabetics might have would probably be related to being overweight.

Why are some minority groups in the United States more susceptible to diabetes?

Although statistics clearly show that Asians, Hispanics and blacks are more susceptible to getting Type II diabetes, experts are not sure what the link is. Studies are now being conducted to find a relationship between childhood obesity and diabetes among some minority groups.

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