

PARENT HEALTH BULLETIN



Pinellas County Health Department

Steps to a HealthierFL—Pinellas County

Can We Turn Childhood Obesity Around?



More than nine million children and youth are obese in the United States. The problem of childhood obesity in our country has increased at an alarming rate over the last few decades. Did you know that unhealthy weight gain due to poor diet and lack of exercise is responsible for over 300,000 deaths each year? And

overweight children are much more likely to become overweight adults. The good news is this does not have to be the case if our kids adopt and maintain healthier patterns of eating and exercise.

What is Obesity?

A child is not usually considered obese until the weight is at least 10 % higher than what is recommended for the height and body type. Obesity usually begins in childhood between the ages of five and six, or during adolescence. Studies show that a child who is obese between the ages of 10 and 13 has an 80% chance of becoming an obese adult.

Obesity occurs when we eat more calories than our body burns up. Although certain medical disorders can cause obesity, less than 1% of all obesity is caused by physical problems. Why all of a sudden are so many of our children so overweight? Experts say it is mainly a mixture of poor diet and lack of physical activity. American children need to increase their intake of fruits, vegetables, beans, whole grains and low fat dairy products and reduce their intake of high calorie and low nutrient foods, including snack foods and beverages. Regular exercise on most days of the week for at least 60 minutes is recommended.

There are many health risks associated with obesity. Unfortunately, obesity is among the easiest medical conditions to recognize, but one of the most difficult to treat.

Obesity can lead to increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, breathing problems, trouble sleeping, and emotional problems.

What Can You Do?

Obese children need a medical evaluation by a doctor to consider the possibility of a physical cause. If there is no physical problem, the proven way to lose weight is to reduce the number of calories being eaten and to increase the child's level of physical activity. Since obesity often affects more than one family member, making healthy eating and regular exercise a family activity can improve the chances of successful weight control for the child. A child who is obese needs a strong support system and getting the family involved can help provide that. It is not easy for a child to say no to the foods that are offered at many school and social events. Neither is it easy for a child to carry on the self discipline necessary to stay on a diet. This is why it is so necessary for the family to be there for the child.

There are ways to manage obesity in children and adolescents. Start a weight management program and change eating habits (eat slowly). Plan meals ahead and make better food choices (less fatty foods, avoid junk foods). Control portions and eat fewer calories. Increase physical activity by having a more active lifestyle. Know what your child eats at school. Eat meals together as a family instead of while watching television.

Additionally, your child may find it very helpful to attend a weight support group on a weekly basis. These groups have been found to be very motivational for those trying to lose weight.



“The dramatic rise in the number of U.S. Children who are obese, have Type 2 diabetes and are at risk for developing chronic disease in adulthood is a matter of national concern.”

*—Institute of Medicine
Committee on Food Marketing*



Obesity frequently becomes a lifelong issue. Many obese adolescents gain back their lost pounds after they have reached their goal because they go back to their old habits of eating and exercising.

To keep the weight off, an adolescent needs to learn to eat and enjoy healthy foods in moderate amounts and to exercise regularly to maintain the desired weight. Parents can help by making it a family affair to eat healthy and exercise together! Parents can also help to improve their child's self esteem by emphasizing the child's strengths and positive qualities rather than just focusing on their weight problem.

MAKING MEALS COUNT AT YOUR HOUSE

In our fast paced world, meals are often eaten on the run. This can mean bags of greasy chips, prepackaged snacks and other fast foods. Rushed meals can lead to poor nutrition choices and bigger portions. With some preparation, you can make your family's meals count. When you sit down to dinner together, you're more likely to eat healthy foods while having a chance to catch up on each other's lives. Try these options:

- ▶ Plan out the week's dinner menu beforehand and buy all the ingredients you need in one shopping trip.
- ▶ Serve correct portion sizes before bringing plates to the table to avoid large helpings.
- ▶ Freeze individual servings sizes of meals so you have a back-up on busy days.
- ▶ Assign jobs to each family member (setting the table, fixing a salad, clearing the dishes).
- ▶ When fast food is unavoidable, balance the less-than-healthy foods with smarter options (side salads, fresh fruit for dessert, extra veggies on your pizza).



FOOD SERVING TIPS FOR PARENTS

- ▶ Offer bite-size goodies like cherry tomatoes.
- ▶ Help your kids make *Ants on a Log* (celery filled with natural peanut butter and a few raisins on top).
- ▶ Freeze grapes or watermelon wedges for a popsicle-like treat or try sugar free popsicles.
- ▶ Blend a smoothie of yogurt, no-fat or low-fat milk, and fresh fruit.
- ▶ Empty a small serving of fat free pretzels or baked chips into a bowl instead of eating from the bag.
- ▶ Enjoy canned fruit packed in its own natural juice instead of heavy syrup.
- ▶ Make kebobs with fresh fruit and reduced-fat cheese.
- ▶ Make a yummy dip with fat free sour cream and dry soup mix.
- ▶ Offer just one of the granola/snack bars in the package and save the other one for later.
- ▶ Satisfy chocolate craving by offering one "fun size" candy bar instead of full sized.
- ▶ Pay attention to serving sizes; most soda cans contain 2 servings.
- ▶ Offer water instead of sodas and keep the refrigerator stocked with cold water bottles.
- ▶ Enjoy low-fat (1%) or no fat chocolate milk instead of whole milk with syrup.
- ▶ Choose no-sugar-added fruit juices.
- ▶ Choose a side salad with low fat or no fat dressing instead of fries when ordering out.
- ▶ Select grilled chicken instead of breaded or fried.



FREE CLASSES (FOR RESIDENTS OF ST. PETERSBURG, GULFPORT, KENNETH CITY & PINELLAS PARK)

Weight Management Classes: We offer free classes for people who want to lose weight. Call Jessica at 727-893-6895.

Nutrition Classes: Learn how to prepare healthy meals plus cooking demonstrations. Call Jessica at 727-893-6895.

Physical Activity Classes: Free kiddies aerobics, pilates, and stretching classes. Call Jacqui Frehling at 727-328-9622.



Funding for this newsletter was supported by Cooperative Agreement Number 03135 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Health and Human Services, or the U.S. Government.

For information about Steps to a HealthierFL-Pinellas County visit our website: www.StepsFL.com or call 2-1-1 (Pinellas County cell phone users must call 727-210-4211)