

## Patient information from the BMJ Group

# Weight problems in children

It can be upsetting to hear that your child has a weight problem. But it's a problem that's facing more and more children. To give your child the best chance of a healthy, happy life, you'll want to help him or her to stay at a healthy weight. Treatment programmes may help children with weight problems to reach a healthier weight.

### When is a child overweight?

Most doctors use the **body mass index** (BMI for short) to work out whether someone's at a healthy weight. Your BMI is a number that's worked out from your height and weight. But because children are constantly growing, doctors need to compare their BMI to that of other children who are the same age and sex. They do this using **child growth charts**.

When doctors talk about children being overweight, they mean their BMI is higher than most other children who are the same age and sex.

Being overweight is more than just having a few pounds of 'puppy fat'. Children who are overweight often feel bad about themselves and may have problems with their behaviour. And being overweight can put children at serious risk of health problems, like heart disease and diabetes, in later life.

The reasons why children become overweight are usually the same as the reasons why adults become overweight. An overweight child is regularly eating more **calories** in food than their body is using up as energy. Calories that are not used as energy are stored as fat.

There are lots of possible reasons why a child eats more calories than he or she uses up. These include:

- The rate at which the child's body burns up calories (their **metabolic rate**)
- The child's diet
- How much exercise the child takes
- How big an appetite the child has.

Some parents think their child must be overweight because of their **genes**. It's true that a child's genes can play a large part in making him or her more likely to eat more calories than they use up. But it's still important to help your child to eat healthily, take exercise and aim to stay at a healthy weight.

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### How can I tell if my child is overweight?

You might be shocked to be told that your child is overweight, and you might feel angry or guilty. But parents often don't realise that their child is overweight.

There are lots of reasons for this. Children grow at different rates, and a parent may think a child has just put on a bit of 'puppy fat'. Also, if the child's school friends or relatives are also overweight, parents may think their child's weight is normal compared to those around them.

If you are concerned about your child's weight, see your GP. Your GP can work out whether your child is at a healthy weight and check for any other illnesses that could be causing weight problems.

If your child is very overweight, or if he or she has other illnesses or disabilities, your GP may suggest your child sees a specialist.

### What treatments work?

If your child weighs more than is healthy, your doctor may suggest he or she tries to keep their weight steady for six months or a year. They may 'grow into' a healthy weight, rather than needing to lose weight.

The best treatment programmes for children help them to eat better and exercise more. Programmes involving the child's family work better than programmes that just target the child.

#### Programmes including diet, exercise, and changing habits

Research shows that programmes that include diet, exercise and changing habits may help overweight children to reach a healthier weight. They have the best chance of success if the child's family is involved. If all the family agrees to the same rules (for example, not eating snacks in front of the television, or always going for a long walk at the weekends) then it's easier for the child to stick to them.

However, the programmes that have been studied are often very intensive and run by specialist clinics. We don't know how well they work without this specialist support.

Programmes to help overweight children and teenagers lose weight usually have three parts:

- **Improving the child's diet.** For example, eating more fruit and vegetables, cutting out sugary soft drinks, eating a healthy breakfast and not having high-calorie snacks like biscuits or crisps between meals.
- **Increasing physical activity.** For example, taking part in sports, going on family walks, cycling to school or reducing the amount of television your child watches.

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- **Changing unhealthy habits.** This can include setting goals for healthy eating and activity, tackling hard-to-change habits, and helping your child have more self-confidence and feel better about themselves.

All three parts are important. Your doctor might help you draw up a plan for things you can do at home, or suggest your child sees a therapist to help you make a plan. Or your child might be referred to hospital to join a specialist programme for overweight children.

Programmes for overweight children may help them:

- Avoid putting on more weight
- Lose some weight if they need to do so
- Reduce fat and increase muscle
- Feel better about themselves and the way they look.

We need more research to show which programmes work best. We also need more long-term research to find out whether children manage to stay at a healthy weight afterwards.

Some parents worry that overweight children who are encouraged to lose weight may get eating disorders like anorexia. However, research shows that children who take part in three-part programmes to encourage a healthy diet, more physical exercise and better habits do not get eating disorders.

### Things you can do to help your child

Parents can have a big impact on whether their children eat healthily and do enough physical activity. Doctors suggest seven things you can do to help your child reach a healthy weight.

- Make sure your child has nutritious foods and drink, like fruit, vegetables and milk, at meals and snack times.
- Don't offer your child high-calorie, unhealthy foods such as sugary soft drinks and biscuits.
- Don't use food as a reward (for example, offering a doughnut for finishing homework).
- Encourage your child to eat breakfast.
- Increase enjoyable and practical physical activities, such as playing ball or dancing.
- Reduce the time your child spends watching TV or playing computer games.

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- Set a good example by eating and exercising healthily yourself.

Once a child has reached a healthy weight, it's important they get lots of help and support to stay healthy.

In one study of overweight children who lost weight on a treatment programme, researchers found that children who put weight back on again went back to unhealthy habits. They were more likely to skip breakfast, eat snacks and watch more television.

If your child has been on a programme to manage his or her weight, it's important to speak to health care staff before the programme is over. You need to be sure you know what you and your child need to do afterwards. That way, you can plan to continue healthy family eating and exercise habits.

### Medicines and surgery

**Medicines** to reduce weight are not often used in children. They are only likely to be used if a child's weight is putting their health at serious risk.

There isn't enough research to say whether or not these medicines are safe for children to use, or whether they work for children. The medicine that is sometimes used for overweight adults in the UK is called **orlistat** (brand name Xenical).

**Surgery** is very rarely used for children who are overweight. It is seen as a last resort and only used in exceptional cases where a child's health is at serious risk. Stomach surgery is sometimes used for adults who are very overweight. It reduces the size of their stomach, so they feel full sooner and can only eat a small amount at a time. It usually works for adults, helping them lose large amounts of weight.

But it might be harmful for children, because they might be unable to absorb all the nutrients they need. There hasn't been enough research to say whether stomach surgery for overweight children is safe and works in the long term.

### What will happen to my child?

Children who weigh more than is healthy often feel bad about themselves. They may have problems with making friends, and they may be teased or bullied. Treatments can help them feel better about themselves.

Not all children who are overweight grow up to be overweight adults. But overweight children are more likely to grow into being overweight adults than other children.

Studies show that some overweight children already have other health problems, including **high blood pressure**, **high cholesterol**, and problems with the way their body controls blood sugar levels (**insulin resistance**). This can happen to children as young as 10. About 3 in 10 children who are very overweight also have a condition called **metabolic syndrome**. This is a combination of symptoms that mean they may be more at risk of getting type 2 diabetes.

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Overweight children are also more likely to have diseases like asthma and type 1 diabetes, although we don't know if being overweight causes these diseases. Children with asthma might become overweight because they do less exercise than other children.

If children grow into obese adults, this can increase their chances of having one or more serious health problems. These include high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and osteoarthritis and some cancers.

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