The obesity epidemic is evident in areas where many people live sedentary lives and eat more convenience foods, which are typically high in calories and low in nutritional value. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that about one-third of US children are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight; about 25 million children and teens are overweight or nearly overweight.

How do you know if your child’s weight gain is normal and when it’s leading to childhood obesity? Children, unlike adults, need extra nutrients and calories to fuel their growth and development. So, if they consume about the number of calories they need for daily activities, growth and metabolism, they add pounds in proportion to their added inches. But children who eat more calories than they need to gain weight beyond what’s needed to support their growing frames add weight that increases their risk of obesity and weight related health problems.

Childhood obesity is particularly troubling because the extra pounds often start kids on the path to health problems that were once confined to adults, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

One of the best strategies to combat excess weight in your children is to improve the diet and exercise levels of your entire family. This helps protect the health of your children now and in the future.

Causes

Although there are some genetic and hormonal causes of childhood obesity, the most excess weight is caused by kids eating too much and exercising too little. If children consume more calories than they expend through exercise and normal physical development, they gain weight.

Factors

Many factors, usually working in combination, increase your child’s risk of becoming overweight:

- **Diet:** Regular consumption of high-calories foods, such as fast foods, baked goods and vending machine snacks, contribute to weight gain. High-fat foods are dense in calories. Loading up on soft drinks, candy and desserts can also cause weight gain; foods and beverages such as these are high in sugar and calories.
- **Inactivity:** Sedentary kids are more likely to gain weight because they don’t burn calories through physical activity. Inactive leisure activities,
such as watching television or playing video games, contribute to the problem.

- Genetics: If your child comes from a family of overweight people, s/he may be genetically predisposed to put on excess weight, especially in an environment where high-calorie food is always available and physical activity isn’t encouraged.
- Psychological factors: Some children overeat to cope with problems or to deal with emotions such as stress or boredom. Their parents may have similar tendencies.
- Family/social factors: Most children do not shop for the family’s groceries. Indeed, parents are responsible for putting healthy foods in the kitchen at home and leaving unhealthy foods at the store. You can’t blame your kids for being attracted to sweet, salty and fatty foods; after all they taste good. But you can control much of their access to these foods, especially at home.

Complications

Obese children can develop serious health problems:

- Type 2 diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Asthma and other respiratory problems
- Sleep disorders
- Liver disease
- Early puberty
- Eating disorders
- Skin infections

The social and emotional fallout can hurt your child; being overweight can cause:

- Low self esteem and bullying: Children often tease or bully their overweight peers, who suffer a loss of self esteem and an increased risk of depression as a result.
- Behavior and learning problems: Overweight children tend to have more anxiety and poorer social skills than normal-weight children. At one extreme, these problems may lead to acting out and disrupting the classroom. At the other, they may cause social withdrawal. Stress and anxiety also interfere with learning; school related anxiety can create a vicious cycle in which worry fuels declining academic performance.
- Depression: Social isolation and low self esteem create overwhelming feelings of hopelessness in some overweight children. When children lose hope that their lives will improve, they are well on their way to depression. A depressed child may lose interest in normal activities, sleep more than usual or cry a lot. Some depressed children hide their sadness and
appear emotionally flat instead; either way, depression is as serious in children as in adults.

Treatment

Your child needs to eat a healthy diet and increase his or her physical activity. Success depends largely on your commitment to helping your child make these changes. Think of eating habits and exercise habits as two sides of the same coin; when you consider one, you also need to consider the other.

Eat a healthy diet: parents are the ones who buy the food, cook the food and decide where the food is eaten. Even small changes can make a big difference in your child’s health.

- When buying groceries, choose fruit and vegetables over convenience foods high in sugar and fat. Always have healthy snacks available, and never use food as a reward or punishment.
- Limit sweetened beverages, including those containing fruit juice. These drinks provide little nutritional value in exchange for their high calories. They also can make your child too full to eat healthier foods.
- Select recipes and methods of cooking that are lower in fat; bake chicken instead of frying it.
- Put colorful food on the table; green and yellow vegetables, fruits of various colors and brown (whole grain) breads. Limit white carbs like rice, pasta, bleached bread and sugar (desserts).
- Sit down together for family meals. Make it an event, a time to share news and tell stories; don’t eat in front of the television or computer, which fosters mindless munching.
- Limit the number of times you eat out, especially at fast food restaurants; many of the menu options are high in fat and calories.
- Discourage eating in front of a screen, such as a television, computer or video game. This leads to fast eating and lowered awareness of how much you are eating.

Increase physical activity: a critical component of weight loss is physical activity. It not only burns calories, but also builds strong bones and muscles, and helps children sleep well at night and stay alert during the day. And active children are more likely to become fit adults.

To increase your child’s activity level:

- Limit recreational screen time to fewer than two hours a day. A surefire way to increase your child’s activity levels is to limit the number of hours s/he is allowed to watch television, play video games or talk on the phone.
• Emphasize activity not exercise. Your child’s activity level doesn’t have to be a structured exercise program; the object is just to get him or her moving. Free-play activities as playing hide-and-seek, tag or jump rope can be great for burning calories and improving fitness.
• Find activities your child likes to do. For instance, if your child is artistically inclined, go on a nature hike to collect leaves and rocks that your child can use to make a collage. If your child likes to climb, head for the nearest neighborhood jungle gym or climbing wall. If you child likes to read, then walk or bike to the neighborhood library for a book.
• Make chores a family affair. Who can pull the most weeds out of the garden? Who can collect the most litter?
• Vary the activities. Let each child take a turn choosing the activity of the day or week. Batting practice, bowling or swimming all count. What matters is that you are doing something active.

Make a family commitment: children can not change their exercise and eating habits by themselves. They need the support and encouragement of their family and other caregivers. To increase the odds that your child finds success:
• Commit to new healthy habits and behaviors as a family, with all members sticking to the plan. If not, your child may feel singled out, deprived or resentful.
• Be ready to make changes; small, gradual changes are easiest to follow and incorporate into your daily life.
• Focus on long term diet and exercise changes, not quick fixes or fad diets aimed at rapid weight loss. The goal is healthier eating and lifestyle changes not pounds lost.
• Set achievable goals for your child and family. For example, your child’s goal might be to reduce the number of sugar sweetened beverages s/he drinks. The family’s goal might be to eat meals at the table every night instead of in front of the television.

Prevention

Whether your child is at risk of becoming overweight or currently at a healthy weight, you can take proactive measures to get or keep things on the right track. Start setting a good example by making sure your own diet is consistent with maintaining healthy weight. Then, be active, and invite your child to join you.

Try not to engage in food related power struggles with your child. You might unintentionally lay the groundwork for such battles by providing or withholding certain foods, sweets for instance, as rewards or punishments. As a general rule, foods are not recommended for behavior modification in children.