

Clinical Obesity

Maintaining healthy growth in childhood and adolescence has benefits to health and wellbeing. In Australia, one-in-four young people are above their healthiest weight.

Excess weight gain can result from a combination of the following factors:

Biological—genetic predisposition, physical health, medical or neurodevelopmental diagnosis that impact on food intake and/or growth) or medication side effects

Social—access to nutritious food and a safe space to engage in physical activity, engagement in education, healthy relationships with family and peers

Psychological—mental health difficulties

Lifestyle—diet and physical activity levels

Children that are above their healthiest weight are more likely to develop health complications, such as:

- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Heart disease
- Metabolic associated fatty liver disease
- Diabetes
- Breathing problems during sleep
- Mental health difficulties
- Negative body image

These complications are usually preventable or reversible with the development of healthy diet and lifestyle behaviours.

Top tips:

- **Focus on developing healthy habits for the whole family, not on weight change**
- **Get organised—plan your meals and snacks in advance to avoid relying on high energy convenience food**

What can you do to begin to help your child?

While health professionals can provide guidance and advice, family plays an even more important role in weight management. Children learn from their parents, grandparents, carers and other family members so it is important for the whole family to be involved in changes (regardless of the size and shape of other family members).

How to talk to your child about weight and health?

Discussing healthy growth is as important as discussing any other health concern. However, the focus of the conversation should be related back to healthy lifestyle behaviours and wellbeing rather than weight.

Tips:

- Focus on behaviour and dietary change related to healthy lifestyle rather than losing weight.
- Instead of using negative words like “fat”, “chubby” or “obese”, use phrases like “higher weight” or “above his/her/their healthiest weight”.
- Don’t compare your child to other children and discourage your child to do the same.
- Get the whole family involved in the conversation—what is good for one child is good for the entire family.
- Try not to label food/activities as “good” and “bad”, use words like “healthy”, “healthier option/choice”, “sometimes or occasional food”.
- Be careful not to make negative comments about your own weight or body shape.
- Do not monitor your child’s weight frequently.
- No diets! Diets often encourage unhealthy and, at times, unsafe eating behaviours.

Other resources

Scan the QR code to check out these [8 Healthy Habits](#) sourced from Healthy Habits For Thriving Kids



What should my child eat?

Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods from the five food groups every day:

- **Vegetables**—choose plenty of vegetables of different types and colours
- **Fruit**—choose whole fruits (rather than fruit juices)
- **Grains** (carbohydrate foods)—such as breads, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles, oats, quinoa (choose wholegrain where possible)
- **Dairy**—milk, yoghurt and cheese or dairy alternatives (choose reduced fat for children over two years of age)
- **Meats or alternatives**—choose lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts, seeds and legumes/beans.

What should my child drink?

The healthiest drink is water. Low fat milk can also be a nutritious drink when consumed in age-appropriate quantities. Flavoured drinks such as soft drink, flavoured milk, juice and cordial should be avoided.

How often should my child eat?

Children and adolescents should aim to have three meals and two snacks each day. Regular eating is important to provide important nutrients throughout the day and reduce the chance of overeating at other mealtimes.

Which foods should be limited?

“Discretionary foods” are not an essential or necessary part of our diet, so should be limited to special occasions only. Discretionary foods are high in energy, saturated fat, added sugars and/or added salt. It is recommended that these foods are not available in the home. Examples of discretionary foods include:

- Chips or flaky salty biscuits
- Sweet biscuits, cakes and desserts
- Soft drink or other sugar sweetened beverages
- Ice cream, lollies and chocolate
- Fast food (burgers, hot chips and fried foods)
- Processed meats and pastries

How much physical activity does my child need?

Physical activity is so important for health, development and wellbeing. It is recommended that children and young people do at least 60 minutes each day of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity. The best place to start is incorporating this into your current routines. For example, walking to/from school or the car and doing things that your family enjoy (such as swimming or going to the park).

How much sleep does my child need?

Adequate sleep is essential for growth, development, mood and appetite regulation. We recommend developing a sleep routine—including a consistent bedtime and not having screens/electronic devices within 30–60 minutes of sleep.

- 3–5 year olds: 10–13 hours
- 5–13 year olds: 9–11 hours
- 14–17 year olds: 8–10 hours

Screen time

Too much screen time can have a negative impact on a child's health and development, including interfering with sleep and reducing physical activity. For children aged 5–17 years, it is recommended to spend less than two hours per day for recreational screen use.

Mental health

Young people living at a higher weight are at a greater risk of developing mental health difficulties, like anxiety, depression and poor self-esteem. Some young people may face weight stigma and discrimination (including bullying). Mental health difficulties can also impact a young person's relationships with others, such as family members. Mental health support is available by requesting a mental health care plan with your GP.

Supports

You can link in with your health service and/or community health centre for further support.

A GP and dietitian are a good place to start.