

Childhood obesity and nutrition – advice for custodians



Why is addressing abnormal weight gain a good idea?

Good and steady growth predicts good health and normal weight as an adult. The eating and exercise habits learned in childhood will stay with you throughout your life. If a child starts to gain weight, it is a good idea to look at the habits of the whole family. What kind of eating and exercise habits is the child learning? What will help the child stay healthy and at a suitable weight even as an adult?

Small but timely changes can prevent body size from becoming a health or self-esteem issue later on in life. Talking about everyday habits, such as eating, exercise, screen time and getting enough sleep, with the child is a good idea. It is not necessary to discuss weight with the child, and it is best to discuss your own weight or weight loss journey only when your child is not listening.

What causes childhood weight gain?

Children gain height and weight as they grow naturally. More rapid weight gain than usual is usually linked to small daily habits, such as daily routines, food and drink choices, screen time, exercise and

sleep. Some people are more likely to gain weight than others. Abnormal weight gain is very rarely caused by a disease.



What kind of habits contribute to health and well-being?

- **A positive and supportive attitude towards food, eating and your body.** Not heaping any guilt on the child for the food they eat or their eating habits and keeping the focus on what is going well. Providing positive feedback on successes. This will build the child's self-confidence and support a balanced relationship with food.

A balanced daily life and an appropriate amount of meaningful activities also contribute to the development of healthy eating habits.

- **Eating regularly, every three to four hours or so, will support the child's natural regulation of appetite.** The need for snacking will be reduced when the time between mealtimes is not overly long. Regular meals and snacks will create a safe and predictable rhythm for the child's daily life.
- **Shared mealtimes with the adults setting an example by eating together with the child are important.** Mealtimes should be kept separate from other activities, and smart devices should not be brought to the table.
- **Meal planning will offer clarity to your daily life and support the well-being of the whole family.** Having varied and nutritious options ready at home will make it easier to make healthier choices.
- **Include vegetables, fruits and berries as a natural part of meals and snacks.** You can keep them in plain sight and easily accessible, such as pre-chopped in the fridge. Add them to sandwiches, smoothies and meals in different ways. New options can be gradually combined with familiar foods. Involve the child in cooking to introduce them to vegetables, fruits and berries.
- **Do not keep treats available all the time.** The adult must regulate the amount, which can be agreed in advance. Sometimes the adult can firmly state that no treats will be bought or eaten this time.
- **Water should be the drink of choice, and sugary drinks should be left for special occasions.** You can explain to the child that sugary drinks will not quench their thirst and are bad for their teeth.
- **Adults should support the child in listening to their body and in learning how to distinguish between hunger and a craving.** When a child expresses a desire to eat in a situation where hunger does not seem likely, the adult can ask: "How are you feeling right now?", helping the child name the emotion. The adult should explain the child that food will not eliminate the emotion, and be there for the child. The adult can suggest an alternative activity, such as drawing, going outside or hugging. Food or treats should not be used as a consolation or reward.
- **When the child independently buys products that do not support their well-being, the issue should be discussed without any criticism.** Healthy snacks should be made available at home and hot meals served every day. The child should be encouraged to buy products in moderation. If necessary, the money available to the child can be limited. The aim is to support the child in making better choices without blame.

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What works well for our family? Where do we still have room for improvement?

	This is what works for us	This is something we should work on	This is not relevant to us at the moment
We have regular mealtimes: we eat 4 to 6 meals a day, about 3 to 4 hours apart.			
We make sure that the child eats a full breakfast before the school day.			
We support the child in having a positive attitude towards school meals and in valuing the shared mealtime at school.			
We eat together at the dinner table as often as possible.			
We make mealtimes positive and unhurried moments for the whole family.			
We eat in peace, without any smart devices or other distractions.			
We encourage the child to try new foods, but we don't force them to eat.			
We involve the child in cooking and other daily food-related activities.			
We serve vegetables, berries or fruits with meals and snacks.			
We mainly choose whole-grain cereal products.			
We vary the protein sources in our meals and also try plant-based options.			
We make better choices in terms of the sugar, salt and fat content of food (e.g. choose Heart Symbol products).			
We do not eat foods or snacks high in sugar, salt and fat on a daily basis.			
We usually drink water and avoid sugary drinks in our daily life.			
We make sure that the child brushes their teeth in the morning and evening using fluoride toothpaste.			
We use and serve xylitol chewing gum or pastilles after meals.			
We discuss the use of money with the child and make sure that the agreed rules are followed.			
We do not allow the child to have energy drinks (which are not recommended for children under the age of 15), and we set a good example ourselves.			
We respect our own bodies and the bodies of others; we do not judge anyone's appearance or weight.			
Our attitude towards food is flexible, and do not divide food items into allowed and prohibited ones.			
We never use food or treats as a reward.			