

# Obesity in Childhood



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Lauren is a Paediatric and Gastrointestinal Dietitian with over 12 years experience in a range of settings, including hospitals, community health centres, industry and private practice. Being a parent herself, she provides practical, evidence-based advice to families. Whether working with fussy eaters and underweight/overweight children, or people with food intolerances, Lauren works with her clients to make meal times a more enjoyable, stress-free experience.

NEARLY A QUARTER OF AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN ARE EITHER OVERWEIGHT OR OBESE. THIS IS A SIGNIFICANT PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE, WITH HEALTH PROBLEMS ONCE CONFINED TO ADULTS, SUCH AS TYPE 2 DIABETES, HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE AND HIGH CHOLESTEROL, NOW BEING SEEN IN CHILDREN. HEALTHY EATING AND HEALTHY ROLE MODELS PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN MANAGEMENT.



Parents are commonly unaware of their child's weight status, which makes it difficult to recognise the need for treatment. With overweight children often becoming obese adults, lifestyle changes must be implemented early. Studies have shown that providing food education to parents is much better than teaching children themselves. Parental behaviours have a marked influence on a child's diet and research has shown much better outcomes when entire families implement lifestyle changes, rather than parents just exerting control over their child's diet.

For most overweight children, the main emphasis should be growing into their weight; in other words, minimising weight gain or maintaining weight as they grow taller. Focus should be on healthy lifestyle change — eating healthier foods and increasing family activity — rather than weight.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

### Providing healthy food

Healthy eating starts at home. Parents decide what foods are provided and children choose from available options. If a child is hungry, they will eat the foods offered to them. Parents can check out [eatforhealth.gov.au](http://eatforhealth.gov.au) as a guide to the number of serves from each food group their child needs daily. Alarming, less than 1% of kids aged 2–18 eat the recommended serves of vegetables each day. A child's intake of fruit, vegetables and discretionary foods tends to track into adolescence, and those food preferences tend to be maintained into adulthood. With this in mind, it is important that parents promote a higher intake of fruits and vegetables and reduce the consumption of discretionary\* foods.

### Takeaway and eating out

Many parents juggle parenthood with careers, and fast food is convenient, cheap and well marketed. It is often laden with kilojoules, fat and salt, and low in vegetables and fibre. Some fast food outlets provide children's meals exceeding the daily sodium and saturated fat recommendations for 4 to 8-year-olds. With the average household spending a third of its food budget on eating out and fast food, there is room to save dollars and improve health.

### Role-modelling

Parents should be encouraged to provide healthy food choices and to role-model healthy habits. Tips to help with a healthy dinner include planning a week's meals in advance, or cooking extra serves and freezing them for nights when there is no time to cook. One of the most important things families can do is eat together! Children should eat in a structured, family-focused environment, without distractions such as television. Research shows people can eat 10–50 per cent more food when distracted at meal times. Studies also show close links between parental intake of fruit and vegetables and the amount eaten by children. A parent's lifestyle has a significant influence on their child.

### Hunger cues

Children should be allowed to self-regulate their food intake. Most children are born with the ability to know when they are hungry or full. Like adults, children have changing appetites and eat more some days than others. Making children finish the food on their plate overrides their ability to self-regulate their food intake and sets them up for overeating. Children should be encouraged to focus on internal hunger cues rather than external cues. Parents can facilitate children's satiation by allowing children to serve themselves, and by considering age-appropriate portion sizes. A guide for carbohydrate foods such as rice, pasta and potato is the size of their fist. A meat serve is the size and thickness of their palm.

*\* Discretionary foods are not necessary for a healthy diet and are too high in saturated fat and/or added sugars, added salt or alcohol and low in fibre. These foods and drinks can also be too high in kilojoules (energy). Many tend to have low levels of essential nutrients so are often referred to as 'energy-dense' but 'nutrient-poor' foods. For more information see [eatforhealth.gov.au](http://eatforhealth.gov.au).*

## TIPS FOR OBESITY PREVENTION

Make changes gradually, as a family. Choose three changes to start with and add others over time. Try implementing a new change each week.

- Provide plenty of vegetables and fruits.
  - Vegetables such as zucchini, carrots, mushrooms and lentils can be grated or finely chopped and added to hamburgers, pasta sauces, meatloaf, risottos, fried rice and casseroles.
  - Use vegetable sticks in place of crackers or bread with dips.
  - Eat a rainbow of colours each day.
- Purchase wholegrain or wholemeal breads and cereals.
- Let kids help in the kitchen — they will develop cooking skills and enjoy eating their own creations. This can include packing their own lunchboxes.
- Start the day with a balanced breakfast.
- Include low-fat or non-fat milk or dairy products for children over the age of 2.
- Choose lean meats, poultry, fish, nuts, lentils and beans for protein.
- Serve reasonably sized portions. A child's plate should be 1/3 vegetables, 1/3 carbohydrate and 1/3 protein.
- Encourage your family to drink lots of water.
- Limit sugar-sweetened beverages, including juice. Milk and water are the best drinks for children.
- Avoid buying high-fat, high-sugar processed snacks for home and school. Save treats for special occasions and limit takeaway to no more than once per week.
- Promote physical activity. Increased use of electronic devices has children spending significantly less time being physically active.
  - Be active every day.
  - Encourage active family time. Go for bike rides, bush walks, explore new swimming locations, find new playgrounds, play soccer/football/basketball.
  - Walk to school or drive halfway then walk the last part.
- Reduce sedentary time.
  - Limit screen time, particularly when the kids are having a play date. This is the perfect opportunity for kids to be active with their friends.

For advice tailored to individual and family requirements and preferences, see an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD). To find your local APD, search 'Find an Accredited Practising Dietitian' at [daa.asn.au](http://daa.asn.au) or freecall 1800 812 942.