

## **My child is overweight (The Basics)**

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

**How do I know if my child is overweight?** — Your child’s doctor or nurse will tell you. He or she will measure your child’s height and weight and use those measurements to calculate a number called the “body mass index” or “BMI.”

The doctor or nurse will use your child’s BMI to tell if your child’s weight is healthy for his or her height. To do this, the doctor or nurse will compare your child’s BMI to the BMIs of other children of the same age and sex. If your child’s BMI is high compared to other children, he or she is overweight. When a child’s BMI is much too high, doctors sometimes use the terms “obese” or “obesity.”

**Why is it important for my child to have a healthy weight?** — It’s important to have a healthy weight, because children who are very overweight can have:

- Liver problems
- Asthma – This is a lung condition that can make it hard to breathe.
- High blood pressure
- Knee or back pain
- Sleep apnea – This is a condition that makes people stop breathing for short periods during sleep.

It’s also important that your child have a healthy weight so that he or she will have a healthy weight as an adult. Being overweight as an adult can lead to medical problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes (high blood sugar), heart attacks, and some types of cancer.

**What causes children to be overweight?** — Children can be overweight for different reasons. Some children simply gain weight more easily than other children. These children can become overweight by eating too much, eating unhealthy foods, or not getting enough exercise. When children gain weight very easily, they have to work extra hard to get to and stay at a healthy weight.

Although uncommon, some medicines and medical conditions can also make children gain weight more easily.

**Will my child need tests if he or she is overweight?** — Maybe. The doctor or nurse will talk with you and your child, and do an exam. He or she might do blood tests to check for:

- A condition that could be causing your child to gain weight easily
- Health problems that can happen when children are overweight

**How can I help my child get to a healthy weight?** — To help your child get to a healthy weight, you need to help him or her eat healthy foods and be more active. Making these lifestyle changes can be hard, especially at first.

To help you and your child start making lifestyle changes, think of the numbers 5-2-1-0. Each of these numbers stands for a goal you can try to reach every day to help your child be healthier.

- 5 – Have your child eat 5 servings of fruits or vegetables each day. Frozen fruits and vegetables count towards the goal, but fruit juice does not. A serving is usually 1 whole fruit (such as an apple or banana) or ½ cup of vegetables. If your child does not like vegetables or fruit, start slowly. Eat these foods yourself to set a good example, and have your child keep trying them.
- 2 – Limit your child’s “screen time” to 2 hours or less each day. Screen time includes watching TV, playing video games, or using the computer for things other than homework.
- 1 – Have your child do physical activity for 1 hour or more each day. This can include doing a sport, dancing, or playing outside.
- 0 – Your child should have 0 sugary drinks each day. Sugary drinks include soda, sports drinks, and all juices.

You and your child might not be able to meet all of these goals at first, but that’s OK. Choose 1 or 2 goals to try first. Later on, you can try to meet all of these goals.

**Is there anything else I can do to help my child?** — Yes. You can:

- Avoid bringing unhealthy food into your home. If you have unhealthy food in the home, your child is likely to eat it even if you tell him or her not to.
- Involve the whole family. Have everyone in the family eat healthier and be more active, even those who have a normal weight. Try to do physical activities as a family. This can be as simple as going to a playground or taking a walk.
- Tell your child that the goal is for him or her to be healthy and strong. Let him or her know that the way to be healthy and strong is to eat healthy food and be active.
- Get help if being overweight is causing your child to be sad, worried, or have a hard time in school. Ask the doctor or nurse for ways to get help for your child.
- Work with your child’s doctor or nurse. See him or her for regular check-ups, so that he or she can follow your child’s BMI over time. Let the doctor or nurse know if you are having trouble meeting the 5-2-1-0 goals. He or she can help you get started or give you some tips. He or she might also recommend that you talk with a dietitian (food expert). A dietitian can help you choose healthy foods and plan meals.