

Childhood obesity

In 2010, a quarter of Australian children aged between 5 and 11 years were overweight or obese. The factors contributing to increasing childhood obesity in Australia are in our lifestyles – too much ‘sometimes’ food, not enough physical activity and too much sitting down.

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What is childhood obesity?

Overweight and obesity are terms used to describe having an excessive amount of body fat. Obese is a more severe form of overweight. These are officially defined using [Body Mass Index \(BMI\)](#), a scale that identifies healthy, overweight and obese weight ranges.

Children and BMI

For children, BMI ranges also take into account the age and gender of the child.



You can use a simple [BMI calculator](#) and growth charts to see how your child's weight and health are tracking. For more information about your child's BMI, talk to your maternal and child health nurse or doctor.

There are no definitions of overweight and obesity for children under the age of two. The best way to monitor children in this age range is to keep an eye on their growth and development using the standard [charts](#) and information about appropriate weight for age. It's also important to discuss this with your GP.

Causes of obesity

Obesity has many causes. Put simply, it's caused by taking in more energy than is used up over a period of time. Research is helping us understand more about an individual's likelihood of becoming overweight or obese, but the most important factors are in our lifestyle.

Obesity can be caused by eating too much or eating a lot of 'sometimes' foods. These days we tend to eat larger food servings, snack more and consume more high-calorie, low-nutrition food. Problem foods include soft drinks, cordial, juice, chips, lollies and snack bars.

Our family background (the genes we inherit from our parents) influences our likelihood of becoming overweight. It also influences the effects of our weight on our health. But because lifestyle factors have a greater influence on weight gain, changing our behaviour to include healthy habits will make a significant difference to being healthy.



Inadequate physical activity is also a key contributor to obesity. Children's overall physical activity has decreased for the following reasons:

- Children are less likely to walk or ride bikes to get to places.
- Parents are more likely to drive their children around.
- Families spend less time outdoors.
- Many houses have small backyards.
- Concerns about safety means that parents now discourage outdoor play, both at home and in public parks.
- Daily tasks around the house don't require as much physical exertion as they did in the past.

Finally, obesity is rising because children are spending too much leisure time on low-energy pastimes, such as watching TV and computer use.



Read more about [how much activity kids need](#) and [obstacles to physical activity](#).

Consequences of obesity

Childhood obesity has serious consequences for children's health and wellbeing. These consequences include the following:

- Adult obesity: there are close links between obesity in childhood and being an overweight or obese adult.
- Health disorders: these include problems in childhood that have in the past been diagnosed only in adults, such as [type-2 diabetes](#), hip and joint problems and obstructive sleep apnoea.
- Emotional and social problems: these include teasing and [bullying](#), low [self-esteem](#), poor body image, [depression](#) and eating disorders.
- If children remain overweight there can be physical health problems in adulthood. These include cardiovascular disease, type-2 diabetes, types of cancer, infertility and skin disorders.

If a child has been obese since early childhood, associated illnesses and health problems are more likely to occur in adulthood.

Preventing obesity

There are three main ways to prevent your child becoming overweight or obese:

did you know ?

- The health problems associated with childhood obesity are severe. There are concerns that parents of the current generation of Australian children will outlive their children.
- The number of overweight children nearly doubled between 1985 and 1995, while the number of obese children more than tripled in the same period.
- Between 1995 and 2008, the number of overweight and obese children has increased by 3-4%.

- Promote healthy eating at home: keep only 'everyday' foods in the cupboard, avoid or limit 'sometimes' foods, and talk to your child about health and nutrition. Have three meals and two healthy snacks a day, always have breakfast and make water their 'everyday' drink.
- Encourage your child to be active, and develop an active family lifestyle: you don't have to engage in strenuous physical activity all the time – instead, make being active a fun part of your family's daily routine. For example, walk to school or sport, kick a football together in the park, or take stairs instead of lifts or escalators. Getting active can be a great way to spend positive family time together!
- Limit screen-based activities: make some family rules that set boundaries on the amount of time spent watching TV or playing computer games. Think about limiting screen time, particularly while eating and during daylight hours when it takes away from outdoors time and active leisure.



Children do as you do, so it's important to model an active lifestyle and healthy eating patterns. You might also want to see our 12 tips for living well and [avoiding childhood obesity](#).

Common myths about weight

There are several myths and misconceptions about weight that aren't helpful for parents who want to look after their child's health. It helps to have reliable information and understand the reality of overweight and obesity.

Myth	Reality
It's only puppy fat.	Sometimes parents are told their young child's excess fat is normal, that it will disappear as the child grows, and that it isn't a real health concern. This is not the case for most overweight children, who are very likely to become overweight adults.
Children will 'grow into' their weight.	Sometimes parents believe their child will grow into a more suitable weight. It's true that overweight children often don't need to lose weight, but rather need to maintain their current weight as they grow taller. But this doesn't mean the child can continue to eat unhealthy food and be inactive. If you're worried, keep an eye on your child's weight. Try to slow weight gain by making changes to your family's lifestyle. Seek advice if you're still concerned.
Overweight can be caused by genetics.	A person's genetic make-up does influence body weight, but genetics can't explain recent increases in weight problems and obesity in Australia's population. Families share not only genes but also environment and habits; this means unhealthy eating and lifestyle patterns can also be 'passed down'. No matter what genes a child has, healthy eating and activity habits will result in better health.
Overweight can be caused by having big bones or a slow metabolism.	Differences in bone weight between individuals are small and don't explain most weight differences. Overweight is related to increased amounts of body fat, not differences in bones. Likewise, any differences in metabolic rate are small and don't account for overweight or obesity.

<p>Dieting is the best way to bring weight down to a healthy level.</p>	<p>Some people mistakenly believe that dieting is an effective way to lose weight, but a diet usually makes you crave the food you've cut out, so you break the diet. More importantly, a restrictive diet isn't healthy for a growing child. A more effective way to achieve and maintain a healthy weight is to make small changes to eating habits and levels of activity. Keep these changes going over time.</p>
<p>Changing eating habits significantly can lead to eating disorders.</p>	<p>Some people are concerned that promoting healthy weight, eating and activity habits can increase the risk of eating disorders. While restrictive dieting and dramatic weight loss might be associated with eating disorders, non-restrictive healthy family eating and activity habits don't increase the risk of eating disorders. Families that use positive parenting practices to promote healthy eating and moderate activity actually encourage health and wellbeing in children.</p>

Getting further help

If you want to discuss your child's eating and activity habits or weight, the following professionals can provide advice and information:

- your maternal and child health nurse
- your local GP
- your paediatrician
- your local community health centre
- dietitians ([find an Accredited Practising Dietitian](#))
- psychologists ([find a psychologist](#)).

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More to explore

- ▶ Nutrition and fitness: the basics
- ▶ Choosing good food
- ▶ Food portions: 4-7 years
- ▶ Food & recipes
- ▶ Good fat and bad fat: the basics
- ▶ Encouraging kids to be active

Web links

- ▶ VicHealth - Obesity and overweight fact sheet (PDF doc: 73kb)

GLOSSARY

Body Mass Index (BMI)

Currently seen as the most appropriate measure of overweight and obesity, calculated by dividing weight (kg) by height squared (m²).

type-2 diabetes

A condition that occurs when the body either can't use the insulin it produces, or produces insufficient insulin, causing high blood sugar levels. Obesity and inactivity greatly increase the risk of this condition developing. Type-2 diabetes used to be called 'late-onset' diabetes because it mainly affected people over 40. It is now being seen more often in younger people and children

who are over their healthiest weight.

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