What Is Considered Overweight or at Risk for Overweight in Children and Teens?

Overweight in children is determined by their BMI percentile, not their BMI as in adults. Children found to be greater than the 85th percentile are considered to be overweight; however, children found to be greater than the 95th BMI percentile are considered to be obese. These guidelines were established by many professional organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics. If you are unsure whether your child or teen is overweight, have your child’s healthcare provider calculate their BMI percentile for you or consult one of the many Websites that will help you to calculate this. Heavily muscled athletes may be overweight, but not overfat, and excess body fat is the primary cause of the medical complications associated with a high BMI.

How Can Overweight Affect Someone’s Health?

Excessive weight can cause a wide variety of health problems, including:

- Type 2 diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Worsening of asthma
- Heart disease
- Sleep apnea
- Gastro-esophageal reflux
- Poor coping/mental health outcomes (e.g., depression, anxiety, low self-esteem)

What Causes Overweight?

The point at which a person’s nutritional intake exceeds his or her activity level causes an energy imbalance. If this energy imbalance is maintained over a long period of time, a person will store the extra energy as fat and put on extra weight.

Which Children/Teens Are at Risk to Become Overweight?

Scientists who study overweight in children and teens have identified factors that place certain children and teens at high risk for overweight.

Those risk factors include:

- Overweight in the toddler and preschool years
- Sedentary lifestyle (e.g., a lot of computer or television viewing time)
- Natural parents or caretakers who are overweight or have a complication of overweight/obesity
- Dietary intake of high-calorie, often fatty, foods and/or decreased intake of fruits and vegetables
What Are the Treatments for Overweight in Children and Teens?
It is important that overweight in children and teens be treated using the following three approaches, which focus on healthy lifestyle patterns:

- Healthy dietary intake
- Regular exercise or activity
- Positive emphasis on supportive and healthy lifestyles

What Can You Do to Help Your Child with His or Her Weight?
There are a few simple guidelines that you can initiate with your child or teen to help him or her to make positive, healthy lifestyle changes:

- Decrease the amount of sugared beverages that your child drinks (e.g., soda, fruit punch, and sports drinks). Skim milk provides essential nutrients and may satisfy hunger.
- Decrease the amount of television viewing time and/or computer time to 1-2 hours per day.
- Provide a moderately low fat diet.
- Provide healthy snacks for your family.
- Engage in healthy family activities on a regular basis.
- Do not restrict your child’s/teens dietary intake only, rather than changing the whole family’s diet to a healthy one.
- Be a positive and supportive influence on your child/teen and model regular healthy eating and activity habits.
- Build your child’s self-esteem by focuses on his special characteristics and strengths.
- Help your child build his beliefs/confidence that he or she can engage in healthy behavior.