



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## A problem that cries for a parent's guidance

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How big a problem is excess weight among children and teens? What's the impact on health? What can you do as a parent?

That's a lot of questions. Let's start with one simple, direct answer.

Childhood obesity is a big problem that's getting worse. It's important -- and disturbing -- to grasp a few statistics.

The results are even more disturbing. They're reflected in early onset of chronic diseases associated with obesity. What was once called adult-onset diabetes is being diagnosed in children as young as 10, most of them overweight. Non-Europeans are especially at risk. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in three American children born in 2000 will develop diabetes.

Emily Baker, a dietitian who works with weight-management clients at Akron Children's Hospital, says many of the children and teens referred for weight management are dangerously obese. It's not unusual for clients to have high-blood pressure, high-blood sugar and high cholesterol and triglycerides.

Can what you do as a parent make a difference in your child's weight? Aren't some people genetically programmed to have weight problems?

We know that children of overweight parents are at a higher risk of being overweight themselves. According to a 1997 study, both overweight and normal-weight children younger than 3 with normal-weight parents have only a 10 percent chance of becoming overweight adults. Having one overweight parent triples the risk for the normal-weight child - and quadruples it for the overweight child.

But by adolescence, a teen's own weight is more likely to determine whether he or she will be within the normal range as an adult.

Overweight teens have more than a 50 percent chance of becoming overweight adults, even if neither parent is overweight.

That risk increases to between 70 percent and 80 percent if at least one parent is overweight.

Although sometimes there are genetic factors, we can't blame this on genetics alone. Parents create an environment in which their children have to operate. It's clear that social and environmental changes are responsible for the alarming rise of obesity in this country. Our genes don't change in a single generation.

If you're concerned about your child's weight, the first step is a visit to your child's health-care provider. He or she can do a complete physical and determine whether there might be a medical cause. Your child can be screened for health problems associated with weight - for example diabetes, high cholesterol, and high-blood pressure.

To determine whether your child's weight is in the healthy range, the doctor will compare your child's body

mass index with national standards. Bear in mind, healthy BMIs for children and adolescents vary, depending on age and gender. Children and teens with weights at or over the 95th percentile are considered overweight; those with weights between the 85th and 95th percentiles are at risk for overweight. You can go to the USDA/Agricultural Research Service's Children's Nutrition Research Center Web site (see the accompanying list of resources) for a BMI calculator.

Your health care provider also can plot your child's height and weight on a standardized growth chart. A sudden or relentless increase or drop in BMI percentiles should be evaluated.

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