

Healthy development includes maintaining a healthy weight. Help your children right from the start

Tip the Scales



INCONSOLABLE INFANTS, TANTRUMING TODDLERS, POUTY PRESCHOOLERS—in times like these, giving a bottle of warm milk, a bag of crackers or a consolation ice cream cone can seem like an easy fix. But when your little ones are whiny and your willpower wears thin, keep the big picture in mind: Early eating habits have a long-term effect on body weight. To help children maintain a healthy weight, encourage and model good eating habits, beginning when they're babies.

A key factor in determining healthy weight is body mass index, or BMI, a measure of weight compared with height, says Daniel Ransom, MD, a pediatrician at Baylor Scott & White McLane Children's Clinic – Rock Prairie in College Station. Pediatricians track children's progress on a growth chart that shows height and weight from all of a child's checkups, as well as statistics for children of the same age and sex, so physicians can see the trends and share them with parents.

Dr. Ransom offers these tips to help your children maintain a healthy weight at any age. >

1 Babies (birth to 11 months)

PRIMARY PITFALL: Starting solid foods too soon.

BEST PRACTICE: Avoid introducing solid foods before babies are 6 months old, unless directed otherwise by your child's doctor. Starting solids too early tends to lead to too-fast weight gain. The practice often can be cultural, encouraged by older family members who might have done it when their children were young. Ask your child's doctor if you're unsure about what, how or when to feed your infant.

2 Toddlers (1 to 2 years)

PRIMARY PITFALL: Not providing healthy foods because children resist them.

BEST PRACTICE: Aim for a consistent, healthy diet and don't offer high-carbohydrate snacks such as crackers. At this age, children can become resistant to eating certain foods, in part because they become aware of what they like and dislike. "So parents cave and give them high-fat, high-carb, low-protein foods that really form bad habits," Dr. Ransom says. If you stick with healthy choices now, you'll face fewer food battles later.

3 Preschoolers (3 to 5 years)

PRIMARY PITFALL: Introducing fast food and sugary drinks.

BEST PRACTICE: Learn to shop for healthy foods on a budget. When children reach preschool age, they are mostly eating what the family eats, and convenience foods—such as fast food—can become a crutch. Sugary drinks go hand in hand with fast food meals and

"are just a really bad idea," Dr. Ransom says. "Anything that's sweet to drink is just empty calories." He recommends that parents simply avoid buying foods that aren't healthy—because if you buy them, children will know to demand them next time.

4 School-Age Children (6 to 13 years)

PRIMARY PITFALL: Too much time at home without activity.

BEST PRACTICE: Finding an after-school program with planned activities can help keep children from too much screen time (TV, computer and smartphone use), which tends to be accompanied by mindless snacking. Also, at this age, children enjoy exercising as a family, which could be going on a walk, kicking a soccer ball or visiting a nearby park.

5 Teenagers (14 to 17 years)

PRIMARY PITFALL: Not educating about healthy eating.

BEST PRACTICE: It's important to teach teenagers all over again about healthy habits, because now, for the first time, they can cognitively understand the information. Yearly checkups are also important in the years, because their bodies are changing fast and their BMI should be monitored.

GET EXPERT HELP

For more information on fostering healthy eating habits, talk to your pediatrician. Visit swchildrens.org to find a McLane Children's pediatrician near you.



Talking to Your Children About Their Weight



If your child is struggling with weight issues, one of the most effective ways to address the problem is to get the whole family involved in creating healthy habits, says Daniel Ransom, MD, a pediatrician at Baylor Scott & White McLane Children's Clinic – Rock Prairie.

"If the whole family is doing it, you don't point the finger at the kids individually," he says. "It becomes a 'we' thing, not a 'you' thing."

The National Institutes of Health suggests these healthy changes for the whole family:

- At mealtime, fill half the plate with fruits and vegetables.
- Replace sugar-sweetened drinks with water or fat-free milk.
- Try a new fruit or vegetable with dinner each week.
- Eat together as a family as often as possible.

Families also can learn about things like energy balance, which is the number of calories you take in versus the number of calories you burn through activity, and healthy eating habits.

When discussing weight with children, "the big thing to talk to them about is the direction they're moving," Dr. Ransom says, "and that they can change it."