

Definitions

* *Overweight for children: a BMI at or above the 95th percentile of the CDC growth charts.*

** *At risk of Overweight: a BMI between the 85th and 95th percentile of the CDC growth charts.*

Body Mass Index (BMI): a measurement system used to define overweight and obesity. BMI is a measure of weight in relation to height.

For children and adolescents who are growing, the measurement is a function of age and sex-specific BMI, based on revised Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) growth charts.

(www.cdc.gov/growthcharts).

BMI is the recommended screening tool for children who are overweight or at risk of overweight.



**Family and
Consumer
Sciences**

Overweight and obesity are critical health issues in America, and the trend among children is alarming. The number of children aged 6 to 11 who are overweight has more than doubled in the past twenty years, while the number of overweight adolescents has tripled.¹ Nationally, between 20-30 percent of children aged 2 to 19 can be classified as overweight* or at risk of overweight.**² In Michigan, 12 percent of students in grades 9 to 12 meet the definition for overweight.³ These statistics are disturbing because children who are overweight at age 6 and beyond have a greater than 50 percent chance of being obese as adults.⁴

The Risks

Being overweight as a child may represent the start of lifelong health problems.

- Serious health conditions, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, early maturation and orthopedic problems occur with increased frequency in overweight youth.⁵
- Type 2 diabetes, once regarded as an adult disease, has increased among children and adolescents in the last few decades.^{5,6}
- Psychosocial issues (i.e., discrimination), low self-esteem, unsafe dieting practices, and the potential for eating disorders are also risks faced by overweight children.^{7,8}

The Causes

Factors that contribute to overweight in children are numerous and complex. Body weight is the result of a combination of genetic, behavioral, lifestyle, and cultural influences. Lack of physical activity and unhealthy eating habits play an important role in the development of childhood overweight.

Children today spend an average of four hours per day—more time than any other generation—engaged in sedentary activities such as watching television and playing computer and video games.^{5,9} Opportunities to be physically active in schools are often limited with less than 20 percent of Michigan schools requiring physical education after 10th grade, and less than 5 percent of the schools requiring it at the 12th grade.¹⁰

Other lifestyle factors contribute to the unhealthy eating habits of children. The increased availability of convenience foods, more meals eaten away from home, fewer family meals, and greater portion sizes have increased the potential for weight gain.¹¹ Many children's diets do not meet nutrition guidelines. Only 18 percent of Michigan's high school-aged students meet the guideline of at least five daily servings of fruits and vegetables.³ Milk consumption has decreased, while the consumption of non-diet soft drinks and non-citrus juice has increased.¹²

Promoting Healthy Weight

Various strategies are needed to help prevent children from becoming overweight and to increase their physical and emotional well-being. These strategies for all children and their families include: (1) promoting healthy eating through education and by increasing access to healthy foods, and (2) providing opportunities for regular physical activity. Schools play a key role in creating an environment where students can improve their food choices and be active. Foods offered should be consistent with guidelines for a healthy childhood weight, and opportunities should be provided for physical activity throughout the day. Healthy eating and physical activity during school years will build the foundation for a health-promoting lifestyle.

Resources are available to professionals and families to help children improve their lifelong eating and physical activity habits and to provide schools information on improving their nutrition and physical activity environment. Michigan State University Extension county offices can provide educational resources and guidance for children and their families related to planning healthy meals and minimizing sedentary habits. Additional resources, information, and links to helpful web sites are available through the *Team Nutrition* program (www.tn.fcs.msue.msu.edu). Prevention of overweight during childhood requires a collaborative commitment within communities. Schools, families, health professionals, government agencies, profit and non-profit organizations must work together to promote physical activity and healthy eating. Strategies recommended in *The Role of Michigan Schools in Promoting Healthy Weight*¹³ include:

- Create a safe and supportive learning environment respectful of all body shapes and sizes.
- Encourage and promote environments where children can be physically active.
- Strengthen nutrition education and provide opportunities for healthy food selection.
- Work with families to encourage physical activity and healthful food choices.
- Identify community resources that help families with weight concerns.

Take action today! Bring a team together to share strategies and resources available in your community to promote healthy weight for children.

References

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Family and Consumer Sciences program staff at MSU Extension can answer questions or help you learn more about money management, parenting, and food, nutrition and health issues. Michigan State University Extension educators integrate university and community resources to provide tools that help families succeed. For more information on Family and Consumer Sciences programs in Michigan, call your county MSU Extension office. Check the government pages of your phone book for contact information.

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