



Helping Your Overweight Teen

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What can I do to help my overweight teen?

If your overweight teenager is ready to put some effort into getting healthier, he or she will need your help. Although gaining more independence is important to a teenager, your support is needed in this effort. You can help by creating a reasonable plan. But remember, your teen needs to buy into it and have a desire to stick with it to be successful. Some teens do best with 1 or 2 simple goals, while others will want to move faster and make sweeping health changes. Any movement in the right direction should be encouraged. Having a partner in the plan (such as a friend) can also help. Part of being successful is to have a support for when the going gets tough.

What can I teach my teen about food?

Teach about healthy diet and weight. Tell your teen the truth. Losing weight and getting in better shape takes effort. Have open-ended conversations about the habits that lead to gaining too much weight such as not enough exercise, skipping meals, drinking too many soft drinks, or eating a lot of fast food. Tell your teen about how weight and body shape run in families. If a healthy size for your family is a size 14, with healthy eating and exercise that should be acceptable.

Don't allow your teen to practice unsafe diets.

There are serious consequences of starvation or fad diets for a person that is still growing. Unrealistic goals lead to feelings of failure and sometimes disordered eating. Fad diets or dieting can also throw your teen's hunger cues off track. Restrictive diets that say when and what you must eat at certain times make it difficult for people to recognize when they are comfortably full.

Teach your teen to eat only when hungry.

People eat for many reasons such as time of day, boredom, or feeling frustrated, nervous or depressed. The best reason to eat is hunger. Ask your teen when they eat, overeat, or crave certain foods. If your teen is eating when not hungry, encourage your teen to do something else to get food off of the mind such as exercising, reading, or working on a project.

Help your teen practice eating until comfortable, not stuffed. If your teen eats until comfortable, he should be hungry every 2 to 3 hours. Snacking is not a bad habit, as long as snacks are healthy. People that eat the same amount of calories throughout the day in small frequent meals instead of a few large ones, often have lower body fat. Try 3 smaller meals, with a few snacks in between.

Let your teen have treats.

Cravings happen. If your teen really wants a high-calorie snack, let her go out for a treat. The treat should be a reasonable portion. Try not to keep tempting high-calorie foods in the house. If you bake something, keep a few servings for your family and share the rest with neighbors or a friend. That way you can satisfy the craving and move on. Any foods can fit into your teen's diet if your teen learns a healthy balance between treats and good foods.

Does my teen need to go on a specific diet?

If you are worried about your teen being overweight or obese, go to a health care provider for a thorough exam. This way you can check where your teen is in respect to growth. Most health care providers say teens that are still growing should not go on diets.

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Rather, they should try to adopt healthy eating habits and try to maintain their current weight (but not gain any extra). As your teen finishes growing, the weight will even out. If your teen is obese, your provider may recommend very slow weight loss. If your teen has stopped growing, it is usually safe to go on a calorie-controlled diet plan. A goal of about 1 pound per week weight loss is a good goal. These plans usually require your teen to eat a certain number of calories a day. The plan will include eating a variety of foods. The plan will include eating a variety of foods from each food group. Talk to your health care provider or a registered dietitian about diets that would be safe for your teen.

Strong emotions can get in the way of a healthy meal or diet plan. If there are issues from the past or present that need be addressed, find counseling for your teen.

Parents Action for Children, a nonprofit organization founded by actor/director Rob Reiner, is mobilizing parents to advocate for issues of importance to children and families. Parents Action recently launched "Stir It Up," a national parents campaign to ensure that children eat food that is good for them and get the physical activity they need. For more information, visit www.stiritupamerica.com.

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