

## Is my child a healthy weight?

Healthy growth is one of the most important indicators of overall health, development and wellbeing of children but parents and carers find it hard to know whether or when they should be concerned.

We know that families of children with weight or growth issues often find it difficult to identify these issues and, when they do, are unsure about what to do next. Approximately 24% of Australian children aged between 5 and 14 years are classified as overweight and 8% as underweight. The information below is based on the best evidence we have for supporting healthy growth in children and reducing the risk of weight issues and eating disorders (see also: 'How do I know if my child is eating too much or not enough?').



### **A child's growth is highly variable**

Like adults, children come in all shapes and sizes and their growth varies greatly from one child to another. There are two distinct stages of rapid growth: 1. the first year of life and 2. puberty. However, at all ages and stages a child's rate of growth can be variable and growth spurts can occur at any age. We often don't notice growth changes until children grow out of clothes or shoes - or until their height increases past an obvious landmark, such as the kitchen bench or another family member!

### **The pattern of growth over months and years is more important than weight**

Growth charts are used by health professionals to check children's growth by plotting height and weight on graphs that span from birth to 20 years. One-off weight and height measures only describe size, not growth. Growth patterns are assessed by plotting serial measurements of weight and height. Minor changes in growth patterns in an otherwise healthy and alert child is likely to be of no immediate concern. However, unexpected changes in growth patterns, such as moving across more than 2 percentile bands on the growth charts, may be an early indicator of underlying health or developmental issues. Growth charts are not intended to diagnose a problem and interpreting growth charts needs to be done by an experienced GP or qualified health professional.

Weighing children regularly at home is discouraged as it can create an unnecessary focus on numbers on the scales, rather than on healthy family habits that are vital for their growth. If you want to understand your child's growth, you could measure your child's height at home and ask your

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doctor about weighing during check-up appointments. If there is a sudden change in your child's growth, particularly accompanied by other symptoms that indicate a health concern, discuss this with your GP or Accredited Practising Dietitian.

### Signs that children may not be growing in a healthy way:

- Wearing clothes more than two sizes bigger than their age
- Consistently eating just as much, or more, than adults
- Having distinct fat around their middle, or tummy
- Constantly looking for and asking for food.
- Spending more than 3 hours per day on a screen (smart phone, tablet, computer, TV, gaming console)
- Lacking energy and not keeping up with other children during higher intensity play or sport.

If you notice any of these signs, you may find it helpful to discuss your concerns with a GP, paediatrician or Accredited Practising Dietitian who can provide a comprehensive assessment that considers your child's medical history, eating patterns including mealtime experiences, physical activity and genetic factors.

### Principles for supporting healthy growth

There are some key principles for supporting healthy growth in children by helping them to be competent, independent eaters while minimising the risk of developing disordered eating. Our own beliefs and habits may mean some of these are challenging at first, but by continuing to work at them it will become easier and the benefits will be worth it.

Do	Avoid
<p><b><u>Take a whole-family approach</u></b> The last thing we want is for the child you are concerned about to be 'singled out' or feel that there's something 'wrong' with them. Any changes should be made by the whole family. Identify positive changes that can be made by the whole family and everyone will benefit</p>	<p><b><u>Avoid weight-based language</u></b> If children hear you criticising yours or others' bodies, they are more likely to see their own bodies in a negative way. Ultimately, we want our body to function in a way that allows us to do what we want to do each day. Keep your language about bodies positive and focus on how we can help our body to</p>

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Do	Avoid
	stay healthy and strong.
<p><b><u>Focus on changing eating &amp; activity habits, rather than weight</u></b> The most positive contribution we can make to our children's growth is to support them in establishing eating and activity patterns for healthy growth. Keeping the focus on developing these habits is the priority for supporting their growth.</p>	<p><b><u>Avoid classifying foods as 'good' and 'bad'</u></b> Food and nutrition is complex and classifying certain food as 'good' or 'bad' is problematic and more likely to be associated with feelings of guilt when eating the so-called 'bad' foods. Instead keep the foods you want children to eat regularly in the house and have other foods when you are out or buy them for special occasions.</p>
<p><b><u>Allow your child to respond to their natural hunger cues</u></b> Responding to hunger cues is essential for developing healthy eating patterns and for supporting your child's growth. If you have been trying to control the amount your child eats, it may be challenging to make the shift to trusting their hunger cues. This is an important skill for your child and your role is vital. See also: 'How do I know if my child is eating too much or not enough?'</p>	<p><b><u>Avoid using food rewards</u></b> Giving food to soothe or reward children when they are not hungry teaches them that eating is a way to reward ourselves or manage our emotions. The lesson we want to teach is that food is for fuelling our body and that hunger is what tells us how much we need to eat. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that we also eat for enjoyment and not always due to hunger, particularly at social occasions, but that this is food that is extra to what our body needs. Ideas for rewards that are not related to food are: books, pencils, notebooks, toys, clothes or a trip to the park, movies or the pool.</p>
<p><b><u>Set a good example</u></b> Your eating and exercise habits have a more powerful influence on your children than you might think. Be aware of the habits you are modelling as your children are likely to do the same in the long term. 'Be the change you want to see'.</p>	

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### Family routines

The greatest influence on our children's eating and activity patterns is the family routine. New habits take time to develop, so don't expect them to change overnight. Choose those you feel your family can manage and gradually introduce others. Here are our top picks for positive family routines.

#### Family meals

Sharing family meals encourages children to eat a wider variety of food and develop healthy behaviours. In busy families it may not be possible to do this every day, but sitting down together to enjoy a meal whenever it's possible for your family is an important habit. Pick a meal when everyone is home and start the habit. Tip: it doesn't have to be dinner.

#### Offer 2 main meals and 2-3 mid-meals a day

Allowing a break between meals and snacks helps children recognise their hunger and fullness. Having set meals and snacks helps avoid constant grazing and once a pattern is established, children will understand that food will be offered every 2-3 hours and are less likely to nag you about food all day!

#### Choose water as the main drink

Offer water throughout the day and avoid keeping fruit juice, cordial, flavoured water and soft drinks in the house. If your family enjoys these drinks, buy them for special occasions so they don't become a habit. If children are consistently eating very little at meal and snack times, and are instead filling up on milk, it will help to swap out some of their milk intake for water.

#### Be clear about screen time

Children are increasingly spending more time on screens (smart phone, tablet, computer, TV, gaming console). Have clear rules in your house which help limit screens to less than 3 hours a day. And remember children will notice your screen use, so ensure the rules you set can apply to everyone.

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Note: Work-related screen time use will need to be considered separately when making the rules or things could get very tricky!

### Choose snacks carefully

There is a tendency to think of snacks as packaged food, which are often less healthy than meals. If your child is filling up on snacks that don't provide much nutrition, think outside the square and offer mealtime foods for snacks.

### Be an active family

Get out and get active as a family in whatever form that takes.

### Plan ahead

Planning meals can seem overwhelming, but it saves money and time, reduces stress, improves nutrition and contribute to calmer mealtimes. In busy families, it can help the week go more smoothly with one less thing to coordinate. Start with 1 or 2 meals a week to build the habit. The benefits might surprise you!

### **Further support**

Find an Accredited Practising Dietitian with experience in infant and child growth - <https://dietitiansaustralia.org.au/find-an-apd/>