

# Avoid the Obesity Epidemic

By Dr. Jenn Berman

Children with weight problems have become one of the most common issues seen by pediatricians. Why has obesity become such a significant problem in this country?

**Food.** Children are not born preferring Cheetos to carrots. For children to become healthy eaters they need to be able to eat healthy foods from the start. Children who grow up eating natural, unprocessed foods will think their first Cheeto tastes strange and will often shun it. On the other hand, children who grow up eating processed foods are often unsatisfied by “real” foods or refuse to eat them.

In his book *Feeding Baby Green*, Dr. Alan Greene talks about helping children develop “nutritional

intelligence,” or the ability to be smart about what they eat in order to support good health. Having a home full of delicious and nutritious foods and knowing how and when to present them to your child can go a long way to helping develop that nutritional intelligence that they will need later in life.

**Exercise.** The American Heart Association recommends that children and adolescents participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day. But most kids today live a very sedentary lifestyle. A study published in *The Lancet* revealed that three to five year olds do not move for 80 percent of the day and many are only active for a total of 20 minutes each day. The researchers concluded that these children have the lifestyles of middle-aged adults and are likely



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to suffer from serious health risks.

The only way to get a child to exercise is by making it fun. As Rae Pica points out in her book *Your Active Child*, "Children should never be encouraged to exercise because it will make them look good, even if obesity is an issue. Emphasizing exercise for the sake of appearance places the wrong value on physical activity – and appearance!" When looking for physical activity to try with your child make sure it is developmentally appropriate. Children who are given activities that are too difficult become frustrated and give up, while those who are given activities that are too easy become bored. Set your child up to succeed so she can feel good about herself and good about physical movement.

**Television.** It is not just the fact that children are sedentary while they watch TV that makes them more likely to become overweight. Television viewing actually slows down metabolic rates. A landmark study printed

in *Pediatrics* showed that while viewing TV, normal-weight children experience a 12 percent decline in metabolic rates and obese children experience a 16 percent decline. The children in the study's Resting Metabolic Rate were burning fewer calories than they would had they been lying down doing nothing. To add insult to injury, this slowed metabolic rate continued to some extent for 25 minutes after the TV was turned off.

Eating in front of the television makes people less likely to obey their body's signals and more likely to overeat. An article in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* revealed that the average person eats eight times more food while watching television. This is not surprising since a brain that is distracted by an entertaining show is unlikely to take notice of what the mouth may be doing.

**Toxic Chemicals.** A growing number of scientists believe that toxic chemicals in our environment play a big part in the obesity epidemic. Bruce Blumberg, a UC

Irvine biologist, is a researcher who studies how chemicals used in plastics, food packaging, pesticides and cosmetics can trigger dramatic increases in body fat. He calls these compounds that corrupt the normal function of metabolic hormones "obesogens." Blumberg has identified how obesogens target signaling proteins to tell a developing fetus to make more fat cells, which can have lifelong consequences, increasing body fat accumulation and making it more difficult to lose weight.

When it comes to healthy eating, exercise, television viewing, tuning into the body's signals of hunger satiety and reducing toxic chemicals, parents are children's greatest role models. We owe it to the next generation to be leaders when it comes to healthy habits.

*Dr. Jenn Berman is a licensed psychotherapist in private practice, and the author of The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy Confident Kids and Superbaby: The 12 Ways Parents Can Give Their Child a Head Start in the First Three Years. DoctorJenn.com*



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