



## EXTENSION

# CHILDHOOD OBESITY A GROWING PROBLEM IN OKLAHOMA

Obesity has been a health issue facing many Oklahomans over the years. Unfortunately, it also is a health concern for many children across the state.

Christine Walters, maternal and child nutrition program assistant at Oklahoma State University, said childhood obesity is associated with breathing difficulties, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and the risk of being obese later in life.

"It's not just the associated health risks children face. There are emotional concerns associated with childhood obesity, such as being teased or bullied," Walters said. "Despite its common occurrence and related health risks, many parents may be unaware of their child's weight status or unsure how to help their child achieve a healthy weight."

The most common way to assess if a child is obese is to calculate their body mass index. Parents can go to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <https://okla.st/2ZbhQCW> and calculate their child's BMI. The CDC developed growth charts that helps to classify a child's weight status into three categories, including healthy weight, overweight and obesity.

Walters said despite its use as a screening tool for obesity, it is important to consider BMI does not directly measure body fat.

"If a parent is concerned about their child's weight, it's important to talk to a pediatrician or registered dietitian about the child's overall health and plan for weight management," she said.

In efforts to help their child lose weight, parents may be tempted to put their child on a weight-loss diet. However, diets are not an ideal solution for many children and a child should not be placed on a diet unless under the supervision of a pediatrician or registered dietitian.

Instead of a diet, Walters has some tips for parents who are helping a child achieve a healthy weight.

"Children learn when they have healthy role models. Parents can model healthy behavior by eating healthy, drinking water, exercising and getting enough sleep," she said. "While eating healthy meals is important, it's also important to have healthy snacks. Healthy snacks such as fruits and vegetables are great choices. Avoid snack foods that are high in calories, fat, sugar and salt. Also, select healthy beverages like water and low-fat or fat-free milk."

Many adults have trouble with portion sizes, so it is understandable children may, as well. Start off by offering smaller portions. Never force a child to finish a meal if they are no longer hungry.

Although fast food is convenient, make an effort to decrease visits to fast food restaurants and eating meals in the car.

"You can create wonderful family time around the dinner table. Try to sit down as a family for meals. Leave cell phones on the counter and turn off the television," she said. "Simply engage as a family and use this time to talk about everyone's day."

Another idea is to discuss with the entire family why healthy eating is important, but do not focus solely on weight. Eating healthy is also important so children can feel good, grow to be strong, have enough energy to play, stay focused in school and sleep well at night.

Oftentimes, people use food as a reward. You got an A on your test? Let's go out for ice cream. Walters said this is not a good idea. If you want to reward your child for healthy eating or another positive behavior, consider offering to take them to their favorite park to play or buying them a new book as a reward.

Another step parents can take to encourage a healthier lifestyle is to encourage their children to get at least an hour of physical activity every day. Here, again, is where parents can get a good example by being physically active themselves. Participate in healthy activities together. Ride bikes on the weekend or take a short walk daily after dinner. Also, limit screen time.

"Childhood obesity is a serious health concern with many potential health risks later in life. Discussing weight concerns with your child may be a difficult and sensitive subject," Walters said. "However, by focusing on the reasons to eat healthy and be active, engaging the whole family in healthy lifestyle changes and encouraging your child when they make positive changes, can be a great start to helping a child achieve a healthy weight."



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