

## Healthy Weights for Healthy Kids: What is a Healthy Weight?

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There is no one healthy weight for all children. Children come in different sizes and shapes. Some children are naturally petite. Others have bigger builds, larger bones, or greater muscle mass that can result in a heavier weight. They also grow at different rates. Any weight that supports growth, learning, development, fitness, and well-being can be a healthy weight.

### Why is weight important?

Weight, combined with height, is one indicator of a child's development and health. Tracked over time, it can help measure if a child is growing properly. For example, if a child is consistently underweight, it may be a sign of a nutritional deficiency, which could place a child at risk for illness and poor school performance. Overweight may be a sign of excess food or inadequate physical activity or other concerns. It can also put children at risk for several health and emotional consequences such as type 2 diabetes and poor body image.

### What are the guidelines for a healthy weight?

Currently, the body mass index (BMI) is the most common screening tool or measurement to determine underweight, ideal weight, and overweight for children and adults. The BMI is a standardized measurement calculated by dividing weight by height squared (in kg/m<sup>2</sup>). It is expressed as a single number, such as 22.0.

BMI is used differently for children than for adults. For children and adolescents, BMI-for-age is plotted on gender-specific growth charts developed by the Centers for Disease Control. These charts track your child's BMI in relation to those of other children of the same gender and age. By following your child's BMI over

time, physicians and other health professionals can monitor changes, such as growth spurts, and determine a course of action, if needed.

Each chart contains curved lines showing specific percentiles. The percentiles in the table below are used to identify underweight, at risk for overweight, and overweight among children 2 to 18 years old.

Just because a child falls between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 85<sup>th</sup> percentiles does not mean that the child is at a healthy weight (or eating well and getting enough physical activity). Again, a healthy weight is determined on a child-by-child basis and over time. If you are concerned, consult a physician or registered dietitian with your questions.

For more information on BMI, visit [www.cdc.gov/nccd/php/dnpa/bmi/childrens\\_BMI/about\\_childrens\\_BMI.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nccd/php/dnpa/bmi/childrens_BMI/about_childrens_BMI.htm)

Underweight:	BMI-for-age and gender <5th percentile
At risk of overweight:	BMI-for-age and gender 85th percentile to <95th percentile
Overweight:	BMI-for-age and gender ≥95th percentile

In June 2007, the American Medical Association expert committee released new recommendations for the classification of childhood and adolescent overweight and obesity. The committee suggested that "overweight" be used in place of "at risk for overweight" and "obese" in place of "overweight."

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## What are the factors that determine weight?

Body weight is determined by several factors, including genetics, diet, and level of physical activity. There is little that can be done about genetics. Diet and physical activity can almost always be improved. Maintaining a healthy weight in childhood is about balancing what kids eat and drink with how much energy they use for growing and moving. For a parent, childcare provider, or teacher it is about making sure that the child eats smart and moves more.

**Eat smart.  
Move more.**

## What should my child eat to maintain a healthy weight?

Healthy nutrition for kids means following MyPyramid. There are 12 different pyramids based on a person's age, gender, activity level, and, for persons 9 years and older, weight and height. The easiest way to find the correct pyramid is to plug personal information into [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov). Each pyramid shows how much food from each food group to eat to maintain a healthy weight and to promote health. Even if weight is not a concern, children need to eat well to grow, learn, and be active.

Serve plenty of whole grains and colorful fruits and vegetables to children. Limit high-fat and high-sugar foods and drinks, such as French fries, cookies, fruit juice or fruit drinks, and soft drinks. Offer smaller portion sizes. Children eat more if given big portions. Do not restrict calories for a child unless instructed to by a physician.



**MyPyramid.gov – a guide to healthy eating and portion sizes**

## What counts as physical activity?

Children should move or be physically active one hour or 60 minutes every day. Sedentary activities like watching TV and DVDs, playing video games, and using the computer should also be limited to less than two hours a day. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that these types of activities be informational, educational, and nonviolent. Also, televisions, computers, and video games also should not be in a child's bedroom.

Physical activity can include almost any type of movement or activity. Simple activities include walking and taking the stairs. More vigorous forms include jumping rope, playing soccer, and swimming. Even dancing and playing tag qualify as physical activity. The important thing is for children to have fun and look forward to it.

**Children need 60 minutes of activity each day.**

## Where can I get more information?

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's weight, consult your physician or a registered dietitian. They can work with you to determine if your child is at a healthy weight and how to proceed if there are concerns.

Virginia Cooperative Extension offers educational and cooking classes on preventing childhood overweight for parents, childcare providers, and children. Visit the Virginia Cooperative Extension website at [www.ext.vt.edu](http://www.ext.vt.edu) to locate your nearest Extension agent for more information on food, nutrition, and health programs and resources.

For more information on this topic, read the following related Virginia Cooperative Extension publications:

What Should I Do if My Child Is Overweight?  
<http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/348-273/>

What Should I Do if My Child Is Underweight?  
<http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/348-271/>

What Should I Do if My Child Has a Poor Body Image?  
<http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/348-272/>