



## **Overeating: Prevention in Babies and Toddlers**

The main cause for excess weight is overeating. Overeating means consuming more calories each day than are needed for normal activity and growth. Overeating is mainly a bad habit and it's learned during the early years of life. Currently 10% of 2 to 5 year old children in the US are overweight. Any child in a family with a strong tendency toward being overweight needs to learn healthy eating habits. It is far easier to start good eating habits early, than wait until a child starts to show signs of becoming overweight.

### **How can I help prevent my child from gaining too much weight?**

#### **For babies:**

- Try to breast-feed. Breast-feeding teaches babies to control the amount of milk they drink. Overfeeding by breast is unusual. Breast-fed babies tend to be leaner than bottle-fed babies.
- If you are breast-feeding and your milk has come in, do not allow your baby to graze. Grazing is nursing very frequently, sometimes every hour. Infants who graze learn to eat when they are upset and to use food to reduce stress.
- If you are feeding your child with a bottle, don't allow your child to keep a bottle or sippy cup as a companion during the day or night. Children who are allowed to carry a bottle around with them learn to eat frequently and to use food for comforting.
- If your baby is bottle-fed, try to feed your infant no more often than every 2 hours at birth, and no more often than every 3 hours from 2 to 6 months of age. Change to 3 meals a day and 2 snacks by 6 months of age.
- Feed your child slowly, rather than rapidly. Don't do anything to hurry your child's pace of eating. (For example, don't enlarge the hole in the nipple of a baby bottle. The formula will come out of the bottle too quickly.) It takes 15 to 20 minutes for your baby to feel full.
- Don't make your baby finish every bottle. Unless your baby is underweight, he knows how much formula he needs.
- Don't feed your baby every time he cries. Most crying babies want to be held and cuddled or may be thirsty and need just some water. Teach your infant to use human contact (rather than food) to relieve stress and discomfort.

- Discontinue breast and bottle feeding by 12 months of age. A study by Dr. W.S. Agras found that delayed weaning was associated with more obesity.
- Don't assume a sucking baby is hungry. Your baby may want just a pacifier or help with finding her thumb. Also, don't use teething biscuits or other foods in place of a teething ring.
- Avoid giving solid food to your child until he is 4 months old.
- Don't encourage your child to eat more after she signals she is full by turning her head or not opening her mouth.
- CAUTION: Don't underfeed your infant. While overfeeding is more common during infancy, underfeeding is more harmful.
- CAUTION: Don't feed your child 2% milk or skim milk before 2 years of age. Your baby's brain is growing rapidly and needs the fat content of whole milk.

For toddlers:

- From the beginning, try to teach your child to stop eating before she feels completely full. Overfeeding teaches a child to overeat.
- Avoid any grazing. Grazing is eating at frequent intervals instead of just when hungry. If a child rarely experiences hunger, the feeling of hunger may cause him to be upset.
- Only feed for hunger. Help your child recognize hunger and only eat when he's hungry. Teach him not to eat for other cues such as when he's bored, lonely, stressed, watching TV, etc.
- Don't deny your child food if she is hungry. Parents have control over what they serve but not over the amount eaten. Research has shown that if parents try to control the child's food intake, the child usually develops poor self-control.
- Don't insist that your child clean his plate or finish a jar of baby food.
- Avoid giving sweets to your child until she is at least 12 months old.
- Avoid giving children bottles, sippy cups, or other snacks while they are in car seats or strollers.
- Don't give your child food as a way to distract him or keep him occupied. Instead, give him something to play with when you need some free time.
- Use praise and physical affection instead of food as a reward for good behavior. Use food as incentives only to solve special problems such as difficult toilet training.

### **When should I call my child's health care provider?**

Call during office hours if:

- You are uncertain if your child is overweight.
- You are concerned about your child's weight.

\*NOTE: This information is provided as a public educational service. The information does not replace any of the instructions your physician gives you. If you have a medical emergency please call 911 or call the Hospital at (208) 529-6111. If you have questions about your child's care, please call Idaho Falls Pediatrics at (208) 522-4600.