

# How to reduce risks of childhood obesity

By Grace Rose

One in every five American children between the ages of 2-19 is obese, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Montana has the lowest rate of childhood obesity in the country with one in every ten children being obese.

Childhood obesity is usually defined as 20% or more above ideal body weight for the child's height and age, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Big Sky Country offers many opportunities for outdoor activities, and this likely helps keep our kids fit. However, over the last two years there has been a decrease in physical activity among youth. Increased screen time has led to dramatic decreases in physical activity. Less physical activity often leads to an increase in body weight.

Children who are overweight or obese are at increased risk of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, joint pain, sleep apnea and asthma. They are also more likely to be obese as adults. Each of these conditions also leads to poorer health outcomes as adults.

It is not just physical health that suffers when a child is overweight or obese; mental health is also severely affected. Anxiety and depression are reported at higher rates in obese kids. Children and teens who are obese also report lower self-esteem and lower quality of life. They are more likely to report that they are bullied.

While obesity is on the rise, there are many things that parents and caregivers can do. The CDC recommends three ways that caregivers can help to prevent childhood obesity.

1. Adopt healthy eating patterns as a family. Eating a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein and low-fat dairy creates the foundation of a healthy diet. By cutting back on sodas, juices and flavored milk you will decrease calorie intake.
2. Move more as a family and replace screen time with family time. It is recommended that children have less than two hours of screen time per day. Walking your pets, riding bikes and having family activities helps to encourage youth to increase their activity. Kids need 60 minutes of physical activity daily. The benefits of increasing physical activity go beyond weight management. Increased physical activity also improves sleep, helps build stronger bones and can boost mental health.
3. Consistent sleep routine. Research shows that kids who do not sleep enough are more likely to be overweight. Children 6-12 years old need 9-12 hours of uninterrupted sleep a night and teens ages 13-18 need 8-10 hours. Having a routine will help children have better quality of sleep as well.

There are many other things you can do as a caregiver to help prevent childhood obesity. If you have concerns about your child's weight, schedule an appointment with your healthcare provider. Your

family doctor can give suggestions on eating habits and exercise that are specific to your child and situation.

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