



## OBESITY AND DEPRESSION: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

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Childhood obesity can lead to a host of physical problems in children and adolescents, including Type II diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. The latter becoming more frequently seen in teens and young adults. Sleep apnea, caused by obesity and early onset of puberty are also seen. Aside from the physical problems stemming from obesity, parents should also be on alert for depression.

The signs of depression include the following:

- Lack of energy and loss of interest in past activities
- Reluctance to socialize, few friends
- Becoming sad, lonely, angry, or withdrawn
- Reluctance to go to school
- Obsession with food and frequent snacking
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Thoughts of hurting him-or herself or others

Signs of low self-esteem include negative self-image and self-talk and being overly self-critical. They feel like failures and are less likely to describe themselves as bright, even if they are in gifted classes. Obese children are also likely to have academic problems and be placed in special education or remedial classes.

### The Social Stigma of Obesity

In a survey of normal-weight children, results show that they rank obese children as the least desirable friends and they describe obese people as “lazy”, “dirty”, “dumb”, and “deceitful”. The children responding included those as young as 6 years.

Twenty-six percent of teens who were teased at school and at home reported that they had considered suicide, and 9 percent tried it. And the longer a child is obese, the higher the risk of depression and other mental disorders.

Overweight children who become depressed also avoid exercise and activities that healthy-weight children enjoy. This leads, of course, to greater weight gain. They tend to isolate themselves, perhaps watching more television and engaging in too much computer time and other electronic entertainment.

## How Parents Can Help

Suggestions to help parents deal with the physical and psychological concerns of their children include:

- Don't criticize or humiliate the child to get him or her to lose weight. It will make things worse and may lead to further depression, loneliness and isolation and might derail any attempts to improve things.
- Discuss coping strategies with the child when feeling and situations cause overeating.
- Praise the child honestly for accomplishments and successes.
- Encourage and set an example for making healthy food choices and exercising—exercise with them.
- Limit access to high-calorie, high-fat, too-sugary food, especially soda and juices.
- Limit TV and computer time.
- Give them age-appropriate portions at meals.
- Don't make them clean the plate.
- Don't give food for rewards.
- Prepare cultural foods with healthy variations.
- Believe in your kids.
- Make sure they participate in activities for their age.
- Be sensitive to them and be positive about their futures.

Children who are obese at ages 10 through 13 have an 80% chance of being obese as an adult. Along with that will come the serious diseases caused by obesity including adult depression. As parents, we must all continue to advocate for the following, as recommended by the researchers above:

- Healthy food options at schools.

- Increased physical activity at schools
- Safer walking routes to schools and parks
- Healthy options for kids at restaurants
- Responsible advertising aimed at kids

National efforts are being made to help lessen this problem for children. Parents should support these efforts as well as any other more local initiatives.

## **What is obesity?**

The problem of childhood obesity in the United States has grown considerably in recent years. Between 16 and 33 percent of children and adolescents are obese. Obesity is among the easiest medical conditions to recognize but most difficult to treat. Overweight children are much more likely to become overweight adults unless they adopt and maintain healthier patterns of eating and exercise.

A few extra pounds does not suggest obesity. However, they may indicate a tendency to gain weight easily and a need for changes in diet and/or exercise. Generally, a child is not considered obese until the weight is at least 10 percent higher than what is recommended for their height and body type. Obesity most commonly begins between the ages of 5 and 6, or during adolescence.

## **What causes obesity?**

The causes of obesity are complex and include genetic, biological, behavioral, and cultural factors. Obesity occurs when a person eats more calories than the body burns up. If one parent is obese, there is a 50 percent chance that their children will also be obese. However, when both parents are obese, their children have an 80 percent chance of being obese.

Although certain medical disorders can cause obesity, less than 1 percent of all obesity is caused by physical problems. Obesity in childhood and adolescence can be related to:

- Poor eating habits
- Overeating or bingeing
- Lack of exercise (i.e., couch potato kids)

- Family of obesity
- Medical illnesses (endocrine, neurological problems)
- Stressful life events or changes (separations, divorce, moves, deaths, abuse)
- Family and peer problems
- Low self-esteem
- Depression or other emotional problems

## **How can obesity be managed and treated?**

Obese children need a thorough medical evaluation by a pediatrician or family physician to consider the possibility of a physical cause. In the absence of a physical disorder, the only way to lose weight is to reduce the number of calories being eaten and to increase the level of physical activity. Lasting weight loss can only occur when there is self-motivation. Since obesity often affects more than one family member, making healthy eating and regular exercise a family activity can improve the chances of successful weight control for the children.

### **Ways to manage obesity include:**

- Start a weight-management program
- Change eating habits (e.g. eat slowly)
- Plan meals and make better food selections (eat less fatty foods, avoid junk and fast foods).
- Control portions and consume less calories
- Increase physical activity (especially walking) and have a more active lifestyle
- Know what your child eats at school
- Eat meals as a family instead of while watching television or at the computer
- Do not use food as a reward
- Limit snacking