

## Defining Overweight

When people eat more calories than they burn off, their bodies store the extra calories as fat. A couple of pounds of extra body fat are not a health risk for most people. But when people keep up a pattern of eating more calories than they burn, more and more fat builds up in their bodies. Eventually, the body gets to a point where the amount of body fat can have a negative effect on a person's health. Doctors use the terms "overweight" or "obese" to describe when someone is at greatest risk of developing weight-related health problems.

As you've probably heard, more people are overweight today than ever before. Experts are calling this an "obesity epidemic." This health problem affects young people as well as adults — one third of all kids between the ages of 2 and 19 are overweight or obese. So younger people are now developing health problems that used to affect only adults, like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and type 2 diabetes.

## Why Do People Become Overweight?

Obesity tends to run in families. Some people have a genetic tendency to gain weight more easily than others because they burn calories more slowly. During times when food was scarce, this was a real advantage. But now that food is available 24/7 in most industrialized countries, an efficient metabolism that once ensured our survival now works to our disadvantage.

Although genes strongly influence body type and size, the environment also plays a role. People today may be gaining weight because of unhealthy food choices (like fast food) and family habits (like eating in front of the television instead of around a table). High-calorie, low-nutrient snacks and beverages, bigger portions of food, and less-active lifestyles are all contributing to the obesity epidemic.

Sometimes people turn to food for emotional reasons, such as when they feel upset, anxious, sad, stressed out, or even bored. When this happens, they often eat more than they need.

## Measuring Weight

Figuring out if a teen is overweight can be more complicated than it is for adults. That's because teens are still growing and developing.

Doctors and other health care professionals often use a measurement called **body mass index (BMI)** to determine if someone is overweight.

Doctors consider a teen **obese** when his or her BMI number is higher than the BMI numbers of 95% of other teens the same age and gender. Someone whose BMI number is between 85% and 95% of the BMIs of other teens the same age and gender is **overweight**.

## Health Problems of Being Overweight

Obesity is bad news for both body and mind. Not only can it make a person feel tired and uncomfortable, carrying extra weight puts added stress on the body, especially the bones and joints of the legs. As they get older, kids and teens that are overweight are more likely to develop diabetes and heart disease. The health problems that affect overweight teens include:

- **Blount's disease.** Excess weight on growing bones can lead to this bone deformity of the lower legs.
- **Arthritis.** Wear and tear on the joints from carrying extra weight can cause this painful joint problem at a young age.
- **Slipped capital femoral epiphyses (SCFE).** Obese children and teens are at greater risk for this painful hip problem. SCFE requires immediate attention and surgery to prevent further damage to the joint.
- **Asthma.** Obesity is associated with breathing problems that can make it harder to keep up with friends, play sports, or just walk from class to class.
- **Sleep apnea.** This condition (where a person temporarily stops breathing during sleep) is a serious problem for many overweight kids and adults. Not only does it interrupt sleep, sleep apnea can leave people feeling tired and affect their ability to concentrate and learn. It also may lead to heart problems.

- **High blood pressure.** When blood pressure is high, the heart must pump harder and the arteries must carry blood that's moving under greater pressure. If the problem continues for a long time, the heart and arteries may no longer work as well as they should. Although rare in most teens, high blood pressure, or hypertension, is more common in overweight or obese teens.
- **High cholesterol.** Long before getting sick, obese teens may have abnormal blood lipid levels, including high cholesterol, low HDL ("good") cholesterol, and high triglyceride levels. These increase the risk of heart attack and stroke when a person gets older.
- **Gallstones.** An accumulation of bile that hardens in the gallbladder forms gallstones. These may be painful and require surgery.
- **Fatty liver.** When fat accumulates in the liver, it can cause inflammation, scarring, and permanent liver damage.
- **Pseudo tumor cerebri.** This is a rare cause of severe headaches in obese teens and adults. There is no tumor, but pressure builds in the brain. In addition to headaches, symptoms may include vomiting, an unsteady way of walking, and vision problems that may become permanent if not treated.
- **Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS).** Girls who are overweight may miss periods — or not get their periods at all — and may have elevated testosterone (the male hormone) levels in the blood. Although it is normal for girls to have some testosterone in their blood, too much can interfere with normal ovulation and may cause excess hair growth, worsening acne, and male-type baldness. PCOS is associated with insulin resistance, a precursor to developing type 2 diabetes. Women who are overweight also might have fertility problems.
- **Insulin resistance and diabetes.** When there is excess body fat, insulin is less effective at getting glucose, the body's main source of energy, into cells. More insulin becomes needed to maintain a normal blood sugar. For some overweight teens, insulin resistance may progress to diabetes (high blood sugar).
- **Depression.** People who are obese are more likely to be depressed and have lower self-esteem.

Luckily, it's never too late to make changes that can effectively control weight and the health problems it causes. Those changes don't have to be big. For a start, make a plan to cut back on sugary beverages, pass up on seconds, and get more exercise, even if it's just 5–10 minutes a day. Build your way up to big changes by making a series of small ones, and don't be afraid to ask for help! Call the school nurse at 634-7584.