

Healthy Eating and Body Size for Toddlers

Toddlers are children between the ages of 1 year and 3 years. This is a critical period in which children are learning many new skills including walking and talking. This is also a very important time when children learn eating habits; these habits can impact children for the rest of their lives.

CHALLENGES IN FEEDING YOUR TODDLER

Toddlers can occasionally be challenging at meal time. It is common for toddlers to go through periods in which they refuse foods that they liked before. Some toddlers go through phases in which they will only eat certain foods over and over, such as only being interested in eating pancakes at breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

HEALTHY BODY WEIGHT FOR TODDLERS

Another challenge that parents sometimes face during toddlerhood is being unsure of whether their child is at a healthy weight. A research study in this month's *Archives* showed that mothers of overweight toddlers often were inaccurate in their views about their child's weight. Some mothers felt that their toddlers were at a healthy weight when their children were actually overweight. This is important because gaining excess weight before the age of 5 years can mean that the child remains overweight as a teenager.

There are several reasons why parents may sometimes think their child is at a healthy weight when he or she is overweight. Some parents may feel that a chubby toddler is a sign of good health, while others may feel that a chunky toddler is a sign of good parenting or that the child is a "good eater."

HOW DO I KNOW IF MY CHILD IS AT A HEALTHY WEIGHT?

Talk with your pediatrician about whether your child is at a healthy weight. You can ask to see your child's growth chart, which tracks your child's height and weight from birth.

HOW CAN I KEEP MY CHILD AT A HEALTHY WEIGHT?

To ensure your child is at a healthy weight:

- Ideally, make sure your child eats from each of the 4 basic food groups each day:
 - Meat, fish, poultry, and eggs.
 - Milk, cheese, and other dairy products.
 - Fruits and vegetables.
 - Cereals, potatoes, rice, and flour products.
- Offer a variety of foods and do not worry too much about your child liking every single one or finishing his or her entire serving of every food on their plate.
- Provide healthy snacks such as fruits and vegetables and minimize sugary snacks and juice.
- Enjoy meals as a family.



- Do not be too hard on your child, or yourself, if your child seems picky in what he or she will eat at times.
- Kids at this age want to play and be active; let them! Limit how much time they spend watching television and doing sedentary activities. Provide opportunities for free play, opportunities to run around and play with balls and other toys.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

American Academy of Pediatrics
<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/nutrition/Pages/default.aspx>

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and other Advice for Patients articles, go to the Advice for Patients link on the *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* website at <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/>.

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics

Megan A. Moreno, MD, MEd, MPH, Writer

Fred Furtner, Illustrator

Frederick P. Rivara, MD, MPH, Editor

The Advice for Patients feature is a public service of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances, but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your child's medical condition, *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* suggests that you consult your child's physician. This page may be photocopied noncommercially by physicians and other health care professionals to share with patients. To purchase bulk reprints, call 312/464-0776.