



A nationwide program is helping communities promote good nutrition and fun physical activities for better health among children.



The national statistics on childhood obesity are not encouraging. Since 1980, obesity has more than doubled among children ages 2 to 5, and more than tripled among youths 6 to 11 and adolescents 12 to 17. Since obesity is a major risk factor for diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and many other serious health problems, the urgent nature of this issue should be clear.

Fortunately, the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), one of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), is taking a leading role in addressing this nationwide epidemic head-on. In 2005, the NIH launched We Can! (Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition), a national education program designed to help children ages 8 to 13 achieve and maintain a healthy weight. The program gets community organizations,

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schools, and hospitals involved to assist families in making improved food choices, increasing their physical activity, and reducing their screen time.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is among the organizations that are partnering with NHLBI to make We Can! work for American children. Communities across the nation are getting involved in We Can! To date, more than 125 have signed on.

## Healthy Weight

For adults, the body mass index (BMI) is a key measure for figuring if your weight is in a healthy range for your height. (You can find a BMI chart for adults at the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute's Web site: [www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov).)

Because children are still growing, determining their BMI is not as simple as it is for adults. Your pediatrician can show you where your child's weight falls in special BMI charts designed for children, based on their age and gender. Talk with your pediatrician about this. If your child is overweight or at risk of becoming so, it's time to take steps to help him strive for a healthy weight.

## Energy In, Energy Out

One of the most important things to understand about keeping a healthy weight is that you gain weight if you consume more calories than your body burns. Likewise, you lose weight if your body burns more calories than you consume. Your body burns calories in a variety of ways, including by just doing basic functions like breathing and digesting food.

People with active lifestyles burn more calories than do those who don't do as much. That's why physical activity is such an important part of getting to and keeping a healthy weight.

Think of the food you eat in terms of GO, SLOW, and WHOA foods. Enjoy GO foods almost any time you like. Limit SLOW foods to certain occasions, no more than a few times per week. And enjoy WHOA foods only on special occasions, and then eat only a small portion.

- **GO foods** include low-fat, low-calorie foods that are also low in added sugar. They tend to be rich in nutrients, such as vitamins, minerals, and other healthy substances. Fresh fruits and vegetables are great examples of GO foods. That said, fried vegetables and fruits canned in syrup, despite their fundamental ingredients, fall into the category of WHOA foods. Be sure to stock up on GO foods so that you can offer a variety of foods to keep things interesting.
- **SLOW foods** tend to be higher in fat and added sugar than GO foods are. Examples include fruit juices; baked goods made with white, refined flour; and poultry cooked with the skin still on.
- **WHOA foods** are the highest in fat and added sugar. Foods prepared with heavy creams and butter, fried foods, and fatty meats are examples of foods you should only eat once in a while.



## Get Moving

Guidelines from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommend that children and teens get physical activity for at least 1 hour per day on most (or better yet, all) days of the week. That may sound like a lot, especially if you're not getting any physical activity now.

But physical activity means more than exercise. It can mean playing games in the backyard, or washing the car. It can mean working in the yard, or walking the dog.

Add the healthy habit of physical activity to your family's schedule. Along with a healthy diet, it can help you keep every family member's weight in a healthy range — and help everyone feel better every day.

## Screen Time

Americans spend too much time in front of monitors, sitting still and burning very few calories. One way to make time for healthier family life is to limit the amount of time your children

— and you — spend in front of a screen.

Try to limit your family's "screen time" to no more than 2 hours per day. Also, you can make the most of screen time by encouraging physical activity while watching TV, such as stretching, lifting weights, or doing yoga. Or enjoy an exercise program together.

## Making Changes

It's one thing to know you need to make changes. It's another to actually make them. But overweight and obese children need your guidance in making healthier choices.

So what's the best way to begin eating healthier, getting more physical activity into your family's routine, and keeping screen time limited?

Start small, and do it one small step at a time. By making gradual changes to your family's routine, it becomes easier to accept the differences.

## For More Information

The We Can! program has a Web site for parents where you can download guides and logs for tracking your family's progress, get suggestions for more physical activity, learn some recipe tips, and much more. Visit the site at <http://wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov>. While you're there, be sure to download or order the We Can! booklet, *Families Finding the Balance: A Parent Handbook*. (Click on "Get We Can! Materials," then click on "Families can Get Involved" in the menu bar on the left.) It has plenty of easy-to-do ideas for helping your family making healthy weight a goal you all can reach.

Also stay tuned for the American Academy of Pediatrics' new book, *Food Fights: Winning the Nutritional Challenges of Parenthood Armed with Insight, Humor and a Bottle of Ketchup*, due for release by the fall of 2007. ●