

Physical Activity: What if my child is Overweight?



Advice for Parents / Carers

About this booklet

This booklet is for parents or carers of children and young people who are overweight. It explains the benefits of physical activity for your child and provides information to enable you to encourage your child to exercise safely. It aims to make sure your child is not discouraged from being active and attempts to overcome any anxieties your child may have about physical activity.

This booklet does not replace the advice that a health professional may give, based on their knowledge of your child's health.



Is it safe for my child to exercise?

Yes, there are very few children and young people who will be advised not to do any physical activity. Every child is different and most children who are overweight will know their own capabilities.

This booklet provides some examples of activities that might not be suitable for children and young people who are severely overweight, but your child will be the best judge of any activities to avoid.

How much exercise is recommended for children and young people?

Public health guidelines recommend that children and young people up to the age of 18 years old should do at least 60 minutes of at least moderate-intensity physical activity a day, every day of the week.

This recommendation applies to all children and young people, including those who are overweight. The 60 minutes can be accumulated in 10-15 minute periods during the day.

What are the benefits of regular physical activity and exercise?

There is lots of evidence that regular physical activity benefits long-term health. This applies to everyone, including children and young people who are overweight. Below are some of the important benefits of regular physical activity.

- ♥ It improves health by helping to maintain a healthy heart, develop strong muscles and bones.
- ♥ It helps maintain a healthy body weight.
- ♥ It may help to reduce stress and anxiety.
- ♥ It can help your child feel good about themselves.
- ♥ It provides opportunities for your child to mix with others and make friends and can help improve your child's social skills.
- ♥ It can improve emotional well-being.



Regular physical activity is also important in terms of your child's weight management as it will increase the amount of energy used and increase your child's lean (not fat) body mass. Lean body mass burns more calories than fat.

Why should I encourage my child to be physically active?

Both adults and children can become overweight when the amount of food (calories) eaten exceeds the amount of energy used. The only recipe for a healthy weight is to encourage children to participate in regular physical activity and adopt a healthy diet from as early an age as possible.



The pre-school and school years are a key time for shaping your child's attitudes and behaviours which can have a lifelong impact on your child's ability to maintain a healthy weight. Parents and carers can play an important role in providing opportunities for their children to be active and can act as positive role models by being physically active.

What can I do to encourage my child to be physically active?

♥ Encourage a variety of activities

Providing opportunities for your child to try alternative activities will allow your child to find those activities they enjoy and those they can cope with better.

♥ Encourage active play

For example, encourage your child to try simple activities such as dancing, skipping, Frisbee or different ball games.



♥ **Try to be more active as a family** For example, where possible try walking and cycling to school or the shops, family outings to local parks and local play areas, swimming, bowling.

♥ Reduce sedentary activities

It may be helpful to monitor how much your child watches television/spends on the computer and to consider ways to reduce this time. For example:

- Try setting some boundaries to reduce sitting-down time, such as only allowing your child to watch one or two favourite programmes per day or play one or two computer games per evening.

- Consider alternative activities such as interactive computer games, active hobbies/games.
- Before allowing your child to watch television or play computer games introduce conditions such as they must walk the dog, do some active household chores, wash the car or help with the garden.



It is recommended that children and young people should spend no more than 2 hours per day in sedentary activities, such as sitting watching television, reading, doing homework tasks or playing computer games.

♥ **Be positive**

Support and encouragement about what your child is achieving is important as it will foster a willingness to continue being active.

♥ **Set a good example by being physically active.**

Children who have one or both parents who are physically active are more likely to be active themselves.

What types of activity are 'best' for my child?

The simple answer is any physical activity, sport or exercise that they enjoy! Children are likely to be more motivated to be active if they enjoy what they are doing. Physical activity should be varied and include lifestyle activities, moderate strength training and structured aerobic activities.



♥ **Lifestyle Activities:**

Examples include using of the stairs instead of the lift, walking or cycling instead of riding in the car, doing chores around the home, such as cleaning the car, sweeping the yard, gardening or walking the dog.

♥ **Structured Activities** such as:

Swimming: the benefits of swimming are well known; it involves all the major muscles and is suitable for all groups. It may be particularly beneficial for very overweight children and young people as the body weight is supported, thus reducing any stress on the bones and joints. However, some children may feel self-conscious about undressing in front of other children or wearing swimming costumes.



Dancing: can be a good motivator, especially among overweight children and young people. Dancing is a good form of aerobic activity that can be intermittent and the intensity can be set by the beat of the music. There are many different kinds of dance, try to find one that your child finds achievable and fun, such as salsa, street dance, hip-hop, modern jive, bollywood.

Team Games: your child may find continuous aerobic activities, such as running and jumping more difficult than children of a normal weight range for their age due to them carrying more body mass. Short bouts of physical activity are generally considered more suitable for overweight children and young people, thus team games can be ideal as they typically involve bursts of activity with built in rest periods.



- ♥ **Racquet and net sports:** such as tennis, badminton and volleyball are often suitable for children and young people who are overweight as they can be done at a lower intensity if necessary. Some overweight children and young people may find it difficult to complete a singles match but may cope better if playing doubles or if the activity is modified or if a smaller playing area is used.
- ♥ **Adventure and outdoor activities:** such as water sports, hiking, orienteering, paintballing, cycling, mountain biking, Duke of Edinburgh challenges can be good fun and offer variety. Many of these activities can be done at a low impact and low intensity and so they might be more suitable for children and young people who are overweight as they can be modified to suit varying abilities.

It is important to encourage children and young people to participate in physical activities that are appropriate for their age, that are enjoyable and that offer variety .

Check out sports clubs and physical activities in your local area, visit: www.activeplaces.com

Are there any exercises or activities that my child should avoid?

Your child is likely know what activities they are capable of and will be the best judge of any activities to avoid.

In-line roller-skating might not be a good choice of activity if your child is severely overweight. Sometimes children who are very overweight have problems with knock-knees and this can be made worse by roller-skating.

Some overweight children might prefer to avoid high impact and explosive activities (i.e. those that involve lots of jumping, running, sprinting) as these put a lot of strain on the bones and joints which can cause injuries. Your child will know whether these activities are comfortable and enjoyable for them.

Sometimes severely overweight children struggle with activities that require them to carry or lift their own body weight, such as rock climbing, gymnastics or other activities that require them to squeeze through or jump over equipment, e.g. assault courses.

What about taking part in PE, sports and physical activity at school?



Taking part in physical education and other physical activities at school is important for your child, both for their long-term health and well-being and their social integration into school life.

Encourage your child to take part in PE and physical activity at school and in after-school clubs – at their own pace and within their own limitations.

It might help put your mind at rest if you discuss any concerns you have regarding your child's involvement in PE with the teacher or school nurse.

REMEMBER: Your child's teacher might also want to be told about the level and type of activity your child can do and any restrictions they need to consider.



Most children who are overweight will know their own capabilities and the steps they need to take before participating in PE lessons or sports.

What else can I do to encourage my child to be active?

- ♥ Ensure the activity is aerobic (e.g. walking, swimming, cycling, dancing) and includes the large muscle groups, e.g. legs.
- ♥ Encourage your child to start off slowly and gradually build up the amount of activity they do.
- ♥ Encourage your child to be physically active throughout the day, aiming for at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day.
- ♥ Select activities and/or sports carefully, according to your child's needs and abilities so as to avoid your child becoming disheartened over difficulties and discomforts.
- ♥ To prevent your child getting injuries during physical activity encourage them to always start activities with a gradual warm-up and end with a gentle cool-down.
- ♥ Remember that your child does not have to be 'sporty' or join a team or a gym in order to take part in physical activity. Walking or dancing to their favourite music, for example, are excellent forms of exercise and cost nothing.
- ♥ If your child enjoys sport, that is fine, but if they don't it really doesn't matter. Just find another way to keep them active doing something they enjoy.
- ♥ Encourage your child to try out new activities with their friends.

♥ **REMEMBER Any activity is better than none at all!**



For more information on:

♥ **Heart health visit the British Heart Foundation (BHF):**

The British Heart Foundation (BHF) is the nation's heart charity, saving lives through pioneering research, patient care and vital information. <http://www.bhf.org.uk>

- Over-11s: <http://www.yheart.net/Over 11's>
- Under-11s: <http://www.bhf.org.uk/Under 11's>

♥ **Physical Activity visit the BHF National Centre for Physical Activity and Health (BHFNC) website:**

<http://www.bhfactive.org.uk>

♥ **Healthy eating in babies, toddlers, children and young people go to BHF website or visit Kids Health website:**

<http://www.kidshealth.org>

♥ **Places to be active visit the Active Places website:**

<http://www.activeplaces.com>

The BHF and BHFNC produce a number of resources on physical activity for parents and young people:

'*Get Kids on the Go*' is a booklet designed for parents and includes tips and tools for encouraging children to be active.

'*Pocket Play Pack*' is a small z-card with lots of activity ideas for children.

To obtain a free copies of these resources simply call 01604 640016 or email: ds-bhf@mail.dataforce.co.uk