

# A Healthy Body Weight

## **Defining Healthy Body Weight**

Students may try to define a healthy body weight according to a specific weight (e.g., x kg or x lb.). This is an opportunity to address the challenges of defining a healthy body weight for growing children. There is no valid method to “measure” and assess the weights of children to determine whether they are healthy. Children are growing at different rates right through to the end of puberty. At any given age, one child may already have gained height, while another of the same gender and age, may not have grown taller. The changes in body shape and size which occur as a result of growth and puberty are also influenced by other factors such as family genetics, eating patterns, physical activity level. A measure of a healthy weight range called the Body Mass Index (BMI) is available for people age 20-65 because they have completed their linear growth. The BMI is not suitable as a tool to estimate a healthy weight range for growing children and teenagers.

## **Factors Affecting Food Choices and a Healthy Body Weight**

A more suitable approach to healthy weights for children and adolescents is to think about promoting their health through healthy eating, active living, and VITALITY. Body weight is influenced by many factors. It is important to recognize that people come in a variety of shapes and sizes, each unique to the individual. There are certain factors such as heredity and puberty over which individuals have little control. Healthy eating and physical activity play an important role in maintaining a healthy body weight. Several other factors also influence food choices and body weight.

## **Heredity**

Different body shapes and sizes are among the things that make each person unique, and they are determined largely by heredity. Some individuals and their families tend to gain body fat more easily than others do. Because body shape and size are largely determined by genetics, many heavy adolescents will never be “thin.” However, they can be healthy, active people who feel good about themselves.

Being comfortable with one’s body is an important step in developing a good sense of self. Today’s culture can be cruel to adolescents who are heavier than what is considered to be “normal.” Some children and teens try to lose weight by dieting because they fear becoming fat. This action can be the start of restrictive eating in a fruitless effort to reach unrealistic goals of thinness and body shape. Each person has a stable weight range that the body tries to maintain. This is known as the body’s “set point.” This is the reason why attempts to lose weight through dieting are often unsuccessful. The body responds appropriately (e.g., by adjusting rate of metabolism) in an effort to maintain the individual within their weight range.

Professionals need to help adolescents of all sizes understand and accept that, to a great extent, their bodies have been programmed to be a certain size and shape. All children and teens should be encouraged to establish a healthy eating pattern and participate in regular physical activity as a way to feel healthy, energetic, fit and have fun.

## **Puberty**

During puberty, adolescent children undergo a growth spurt. For girls, this spurt usually begins at about eight to ten years old, while for boys it occurs at about 11 to 13 years of age. During this time, 20 percent of adult height and 50 percent of adult weight are gained. Growth in height and weight do not always happen simultaneously. Some children gain weight before they gain height. Other children grow taller before they gain weight. The timing and the uniqueness of that growth spurt will influence the body shape and size. Adolescence is also a time when body proportions change dramatically. To sustain rapid growth, adolescents need to eat adequate amounts and a variety of foods. If energy needs are not adequately met, physical growth can be delayed and possibly even stunted. Bodies are like computers that run on their own growth program. Each individual is on his/her own genetically determined growth schedule. Many adolescent children become dissatisfied with how they look. Girls often show a strong desire to be thin because that is what the media portrays as being “ideal.” Puberty is a particularly difficult time for girls because the weight gain that often occurs moves them away from the ideal body shape and size promoted by society and the media. This affects the self-esteem and body image of girls in their early teens. For boys, the issues faced during puberty are focused on building muscles to achieve a “perfect body.”

## **Hunger and Satiety Cues**

All human beings have the innate ability to eat when they are hungry and stop when they are full. Babies and small children are in tune with these hunger and satiety cues. These cues allow them to eat enough to meet their nutritional needs and have the energy they need to be active. In this way they are able to eat appropriate amounts of food to keep an optimal weight. Recognizing these hunger and satiety cues is an important part of maintaining a healthy body weight. Unfortunately, many individuals become insensitive to these internal hunger and satiety cues due to weight-loss dieting. When hunger and satiety cues are out of tune, people engage in overeating and/or undereating behaviours.

## **Media Messages**

Television viewing plays a major role in everyday life for most children and teens. Like other entertainment media, television reflects social values and shapes societal behaviour. A recent Canadian study showed that food and food-related messages depicted most often on Canadian prime time television did not support Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating. Foods shown most often were from the Other Foods category and tended to be higher fat choices. Foods shown least often were higher fibre foods and green and orange vegetables and fruit. The media can be a powerful influence on how young people view themselves. The media delivers the messages that “thin is in” and a large body shape is unacceptable. Often body image attitudes on prime time television deal negatively with larger body sizes. People with larger body sizes were laughed at, marginalized and ridiculed. The media or corporate view of the “ideal” body type for women is now at the thinnest percent of a normal weight distribution. This excludes 95 percent of women in our society. The increasing pressure to be thin is reflected in cultural images. The typical female model weighs 13-19 percent below the expected weight for her height and age. It is not always easy to resist the pressures from the media to conform to an “ideal” body image.

The media often present false images of what people should look like, sometimes glamourizing unhealthy images. Advances in computer technology enable the media to adjust pictures of models, changing their

physical features so that they conform to the “ideal body image” (e.g., making legs look longer, stomachs flatter and muscles bigger). The media creates a distorted picture of reality by:

- Normalizing and glamorizing what is abnormal or unhealthy.
- Creating the false impression that all women and men are the same by not representing whole segments of the population.
- Sending the message that one must continually improve and that one is never good enough.
- Falsely presenting the idea that there is one “perfect” body shape or size.

A lot of girls are taught at a young age that looking beautiful can mean having power and control. Young girls and women feel pressured into being thinner than is healthy because that is what is accepted as beautiful in Western culture. Many girls have a distorted idea of what their body shape or size should be. Boys are also affected by pressure to shape their bodies to match current ideals. Fitness, muscle and body sculpting magazines and products are increasingly targeting them. Studies suggest that the body concerns of most boys is focused on building body mass and sculpting rather than reducing weight. The value being taught is that only physical “perfection” is acceptable.

## **Family Influences and Traditions**

Parents are children’s most important source of information and influence about food and eating. Family eating habits, activity patterns and attitudes toward food and eating have an enormous influence on children. For example, if the family eats breakfast, it is more likely that the children will, too. Family income is another factor that influences what children eat and the food choices that are available to them. Families develop patterns of eating based on what they eat, when, and where, to accommodate their schedules, family size, and activity levels of different members. Families may eat one or more meals a week in restaurants or from take-out establishments. They may use a large proportion of already prepared foods.

## **Culture**

The Canadian population consists of many diverse ethnic groups. This is exciting because it provides the opportunity to choose from a large variety of foods in addition to the traditional Canadian cuisine. Children and teens can learn about the differences in people’s eating habits, likes, dislikes, and cultural backgrounds. They can learn that people from different parts of the world can choose different, but equally healthy, foods (e.g., bread, rice, tortillas, roti).

## **Individual Preferences**

Individuals develop eating habits based partly on culture and family but also on personal likes, dislikes and idiosyncrasies. Some foods become associated with good times, and eating them makes us feel good (e.g., cake, corn on the cob, candy). Sometimes we eat simply out of habit or because we are bored: when a certain television program comes on, out comes the popcorn or the bag of chocolate chip cookies. The main reason children give for choosing a favourite food is almost always taste. Children choose foods because they taste good and because eating those foods makes them feel good.

## **School Policies and Practices**

School has an important influence on what adolescents eat. School nutrition education programs are a key source of information about healthy eating. As well, school food policies can reinforce in-class education.

For example, children taught in class about nutritious snacks need to see them featured during school events or in the cafeteria.

## **Allergies**

Children and adults alike need to be more aware and sensitive to food allergies. This means always asking about food allergies before sharing food. The number of life-threatening reactions to food allergies is increasing. These can happen anywhere – at home, in school or recreational facilities, at camp and on field trips. Make sure your school has a policy for handling these allergies and that you are familiar with it.

## **Volunteers and Professionals Who Work with Children**

A coach, a teacher, a camp leader or a group leader can all have a powerful effect on adolescents through the example they set. Their unspoken example, such as munching on fruit for a snack, or their comments about weight, can strongly influence what children and teens perceive about healthy eating, body image and healthy living.

## **Peers**

Peer pressure influences children of all ages and is particularly strong in the early teen years. Although pre-teens and teens identify strongly with their family, they also want to be like the peers whom they admire. Acceptance in a peer group can depend on eating, liking and doing the same things as the other individuals in the group.

## **Influences of Body Image on Food Choices**

The image a person has of his or her body influences eating patterns and food choices. During the teenage years, the pressure to “fit in” is very intense. Young people receive the message that a person’s self-worth is based on their physical appearance. Adolescent boys and girls need to eat more during puberty because they are growing, but often girls in particular see their need to eat as abnormal and restrict their food intake because they are afraid of gaining weight. For girls, especially, the pressure to be thin often results in dieting as a means of achieving the “ideal” body. A 1998 survey found that 36 percent of females and 24 percent of males in Grade 7 were on a diet or felt they needed to lose weight. For Grade 8 this figure rose to 41 percent of females while the number of males decreased slightly to 21 percent. Teens who become dissatisfied with the way they look may begin to diet (i.e., restrict food intake) or engage in other unhealthy and dangerous eating behaviours that may lead to serious eating disorders.