Battling Childhood Obesity
How to Keep Your Kids Trim and Healthy

As your child grows out of the toddler years, excess weight can become a serious concern—perhaps putting him or her at risk for some very grown-up health problems.

When Should You Be Concerned About Your Child?
At your child’s regular checkups, the doctor will look at body mass index (BMI) and growth charts to determine if he or she is within healthy weight limits. Children are usually considered overweight if their BMI is at or above the 85th percentile. Children with a BMI in the 95th percentile or higher are considered obese.

No Laughing Matter
If your child is overweight, it’s important for you to address the problem. That’s because overweight kids are at risk of developing typically adult health problems.

The Skinny on Childhood Obesity
Just how serious a problem is childhood obesity? Consider these facts and figures:
• Over the past three decades, the childhood obesity rate has more than tripled.
• Today, about 16 percent of children and teens are obese and nearly one-third are overweight.
• Children with a high BMI are more likely to have enlarged hearts, putting them at risk for heart disease later in life.

• According to one study, 60 percent of obese children have at least one heart disease risk factor, such as high cholesterol or blood pressure, and 25 percent have two or more risk factors.
• Type 2 diabetes, previously seen mostly in adults, is increasingly common among children. Experts believe childhood obesity is the cause.
• Overweight children are more likely to develop metabolic syndrome, which is really a group of health problems—including high blood sugar, high blood pressure, and low levels of “good” cholesterol—which puts kids at risk for diabetes and heart disease.

Eating Right
The good news is that childhood obesity can be prevented or reversed. Parents can focus on providing nutritious meals and snacks and teaching healthy food choices. That means:
• Cutting out snacks with little nutritional value, like potato chips
• Offering whole-grain crackers, low-fat cheese, yogurt, fruits, and vegetables
• Limiting soda and sugary fruit drinks and giving them skim milk or water instead

Get Them Moving
Not long ago, children got plenty of physical activity. Today, more and more children spend hours in front of a television or computer screen. Doctors recommend that children exercise 60 minutes a day most days of the week—walking, running, biking, as well as organized sports. Make it fun. Make it part of every day for lasting change, but that doesn’t necessarily mean 60 minutes in organized sports. Exercising as a family, such as walking, running, biking, or hiking, are all inexpensive ways to encourage exercise. Use smaller blocks of time—10 or 15 minutes each session—to space the activities out over the course of each day. More importantly, making it a fun part of each day will encourage healthy habits for the whole family. •

Women & Infants’ Brown Center for Children offers a Healthy Habits Clinic provided by Child and Family Behavioral Medicine psychologist Ronnessia Gaskins, PhD, MSPH. The Healthy Habits Clinic assists families who are concerned about their child’s health and behavior. They treat children 2 to 7 years old who are experiencing weight problems, anxiety, self-image concerns, and challenges with impulsive behavior. For information, please call the Brown Center for Children at 401-274-1122, extension 8935.