

How Does Your Child Measure Up?

All About BMI



It's no secret that childhood obesity has become an epidemic in our country.

So how does your child measure up? For many parents, this is a challenging question. On one hand, many children, especially girls, are under tremendous pressure to look the way stick-thin models and actors do, leading to an unhealthy diet and obsession with dieting. On the other, childhood obesity has more than tripled in the last 30 years. A number of factors can be used to determine a healthy weight range for each child, the most accurate of which is Body Mass Index, or BMI. Here, pediatrician Dr. Jeannette Tokarz answers some common questions about BMI and how you can partner with your pediatrician to work toward a healthy weight for your child.

Q. What is BMI and how is it measured?

BMI is the Body Mass Index. It is calculated by using a child's height in inches and weight in pounds (height x weight x 703). Once that number is calculated, it is plotted on a BMI-for-age growth chart for boys or girls to obtain a percentile ranking. The concept of a percentile ranking is to inform us where in line the child would be in an imaginary group of 100 children the same age and gender if they were lined up by height, weight, or BMI. For example a child in the 75th percentile in height is 75th in line and only has 25 children in line who are taller.

BMI is used to estimate body fat. It is easy to calculate and can be tracked over time.

Both the Centers for Disease Control and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that BMI be calculated starting at age

adults. Early identification and treatment can improve a child's immediate health and future health as an adult.



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two to screen for overweight and obesity. Just looking at a child to assess whether the child is overweight is very unreliable. A study conducted several years ago showed families photos of children with different BMIs. When the families were asked to identify the children with a BMI in the normal range most chose overweight children as being in the normal range.

Children who have a BMI less than the 5th % are considered underweight. Children with a BMI in the 5th % to less than the 85th % are in the Healthy Weight range. A BMI from the 85th % to less than the 95th % is in the overweight range and 95th % and above is in the obese range.

Q. Why is BMI something I should talk about with my pediatrician?

A BMI in the overweight or obese range is an indicator that the child likely has excess body fat. There are health consequences to being overweight, even in childhood. Overweight children are at risk for high cholesterol, high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes and sleep apnea. Also, overweight children tend to become overweight

Q. What should I do if my child's BMI is too high?

If a child's BMI is too high, the first step is to review family eating habits that contribute to excess calorie intake. Larger portion sizes, excessive sugary drinks, and high fat snack food intake can all be culprits in contributing to a child's obesity. The goal for the family is to begin with small changes that are achievable that over time can lead to real changes in the child's weight.

Discussing a child's BMI can be stressful for families and emotions can become quite charged. Everyone's goal is to promote the child's best health for now and for life. Keep an open mind during this difficult conversation. There are many helpful resources on the internet. The Centers for Disease Control is a good place to start: CDC.gov/healthyweight/children.

For a referral to a pediatrician on staff at a Baystate Health hospital, call 1-800-377-4325.
