

Avoiding Infant Obesity

Chubby cheeks on a baby may seem cute, but they could also be a sign of the beginning of lifelong health problems. Obesity often begins in infancy, and it is a key factor in the development of heart disease, diabetes and cancer.

Consider these sobering facts:

- According to a Harvard University study, rapid weight gain during a baby's first six months of life may place them at risk for ongoing obesity by age 3.
- Another report states that, by age 3, obese children already have fatty deposits in their arteries.
- A study presented at an American Heart Association conference showed that the thickness of artery walls in children and teens who were obese and/or had high cholesterol was similar to those of 45 year olds.
- Many U.S. researchers fear that the current epidemic of childhood obesity may mean that this generation of children will be the first whose life expectancy will be shorter than those of their parents.

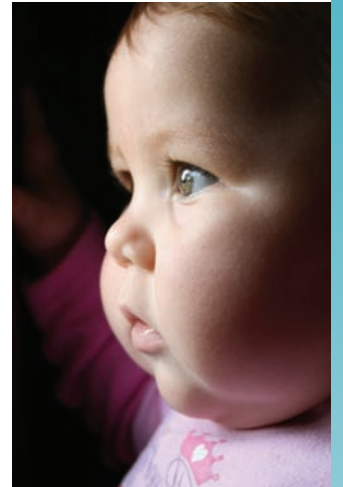
Fortunately, there are a few simple steps that parents can take during pregnancy and a child's early months and years to help prevent obesity in their little ones.



- Start by seeing your obstetrician regularly during your pregnancy. Excessive weight gain, untreated gestational diabetes and smoking by the mother during pregnancy can all increase the risk for infant obesity. Make sure you receive proper prenatal care to monitor your baby's development, including its weight.

- If possible, breastfeed your baby. Studies show that breastfed babies gain less weight than those who are formula fed. Since formula is sweeter than breast milk, it may also cause the child to have more of a "sweet tooth" in later years.
- Stop and think before placating your baby with food. When an infant cries between feedings, it may be for other reasons like a desire for a pacifier, for water or to simply be held.
- Regulate your baby's feedings. A good rule of thumb is no more than once every 3 hours. Once your baby is around 6 months old, modify their schedule to 3 meals a day.
- Don't give your infant a bottle full of fruit juice. It's high in sugar and calories and has no nutritional value. Also be careful not to introduce cereal into your infant's diet too soon. There is no truth to the belief that adding cereal in a baby's bottle will satisfy the child more or allow them to sleep better. It just promotes cravings and obesity.
- Unlike many of us adults, babies know when they feel full. Don't force your baby to finish a feeding unless instructed by your pediatrician.

All this aside, never withhold regular feedings. Proper nutrition is essential for a baby's brain development and growth. If obesity is a concern, consult your pediatrician before taking action. Even if your baby has a healthy weight and body mass index, go for regular check-ups.



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