

# Doc Talk

By Dr. Veronica Naudin



## Teens and Weight: Reasons and Guidelines

### Q: How much should my teen weigh?

**A:** In recent years a lot of attention has been placed on determining appropriate weight guidelines for children and teenagers. Teens have the mixed problem of being very concerned with their weight while also consuming a high fat, high calorie and high convenience food diet. A current estimate reports that 15% of teenagers are obese and another 15% of the teen population is at risk for obesity. The American Academy of Pediatrics is predicting a high incidence of Adult Onset Diabetes associated with obesity in the next generation. At the same time, we do not want to produce eating disorders in our children. Hence, it is critical that parents and caregivers of children monitor weight and provide appropriate and sensible guidelines for nutrition to children and teenagers.

#### The onset of weight consciousness; Pre-pubertal years

Many naturally thin children will develop a bit of stomach bulge prior to starting full pubertal changes. This period of increased weight usually occurs at age 10 for girls and age 12 for boys. It generally happens in preparation of a growth spurt in height. It is extremely important that parents promote the values of healthy eating habits and good exercise routines to ensure a healthy growing period.

#### Pubertal years

Puberty generally lasts 5 - 6 years. During this time, many changes occur in a teen's body. Most notable is a change in weight, height and overall shape of a teen. Metabolism is very fast during these years because so many changes are occurring in one's body. Some teens develop bad eating habits during these years because they are busy with school, activities and sports. Because metabolism is fast during these years, teens grow accustomed to eating fast foods and junk food and some do not gain weight. Despite the fast metabolism, many children are gaining weight too fast and this is usually due to a lack of activity or being a television or Game-boy junkie.

#### The real slow-down: Post puberty

After puberty, metabolism will slow. Hence, when girls hit that last year of high school and boys have finished high school, many teens will notice that their weight may increase. These children are not eating more or exercising less. It is simply a reflection of changes in metabolism. It is during these years that teens have to be more concerned with overeating and not getting enough exercise. Promoting healthy eating and exercise habits can

be the best gift you give your child as they enter into young adulthood.

#### Body mass Index (BMI)

Another tool that will soon be used to track children's weight is the body mass index. Doctors now have BMI charts available that can be used in conjunction with the "growth charts" that you are accustomed to using with your doctor. The BMI is calculated by taking your child's weight in kilograms and dividing by the height in meters squared. [The formula is Body Mass Index =  $Wt/ht^2$ ]. The BMI can be corrected for a child's age and your pediatrician can help you determine what an appropriate BMI is for your child.

#### Goal Zone

In my pediatric and adolescent practice, I have started to help teens determine an appropriate "goal zone". Rather than give teens a number, which reflects an "ideal weight", I give them a 10-pound range, which reflects their goal zone. If they are within their 10-pound range, they are in "zone". However, if they are approaching the top half of their goal zone, they need to be more careful with calories and need to spend more time exercising. Since weight fluctuates several pounds daily due to water gains and losses, this approach helps teen feel more successful with their weight management and has been well received by my teen patients.

In summary, I urge you to work with your pediatrician to develop appropriate weight goals with your child. The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that children receive regular health check-ups during their growing years. Your pediatrician can play an important role in helping your child understand the importance of proper nutrition, regular exercise and treating one's body well. Good luck.

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