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## Do-It-Yourself Health: Healthier Kids, September 2018

 Health & Wellness

By **Amanda Reis**

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The obesity trend for children and teens 2-19 years old in the U.S. has been on a steady rise since the late 1990s. Although the rise has begun to slow in recent years, **the latest data still classifies about one in six American children as obese.**

Obese children suffer from a wide range of issues, from increased risk for chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease (in childhood and adulthood), to being bullied and suffering from depression and other mental health disorders.

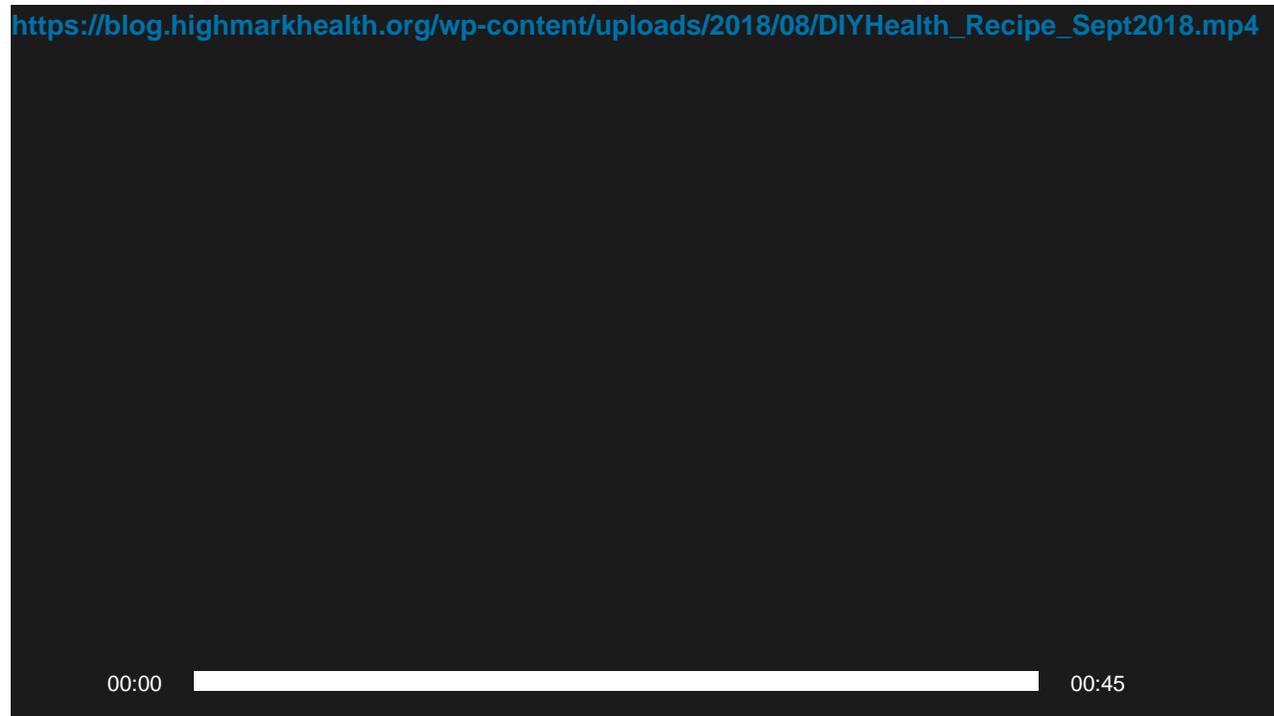
Luckily, obesity can be combatted, and prevented in the first place, by establishing healthy behaviors early on. Let's look at five risk factor areas where some DIY action can help avoid childhood obesity and keep your whole family in good health!

### Nutrition

Just like adults, children should get a healthy balance of nutrient-dense foods while limiting intake of added sugars and trans or saturated fats to maintain a healthy weight. Although **children in different age groups do require specific calorie targets and food group portions** to grow, all children should eat balanced meals with lean sources of protein and dairy, whole grains, and fruits and vegetables.

To build good nutrition habits, allow planning a meal to be a family effort, from selecting a fun recipe and grocery shopping for ingredients, to sharing time preparing the food and eating together. During mealtimes, let children use their internal signals to decide how much food is enough rather than enforcing the “clean plate club,” which can lead to overeating and a tendency to ignore feelings of satiety as they grow older. Disguising healthy choices in kid-friendly recipes is another way to ensure children are getting the nutrients they need — and this month’s **Eat for Health handout** has five to try!

[https://blog.highmarkhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/DIYHealth\\_Recipe\\_Sept2018.mp4](https://blog.highmarkhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/DIYHealth_Recipe_Sept2018.mp4)



**Nut-Butterfly** (adapted from ChooseMyPlate.gov)

**Chewy Chocolate No-Bake Oatmeal Bars** (adapted from EatRight.org)

**Zoo Trail Mix** (adapted from CookingLight.com)

**Banana Mint “Ice Cream”** (adapted from FoodNetwork.com)

**Easy Pea(sy) Hummus** (adapted from Eatingwell.com)

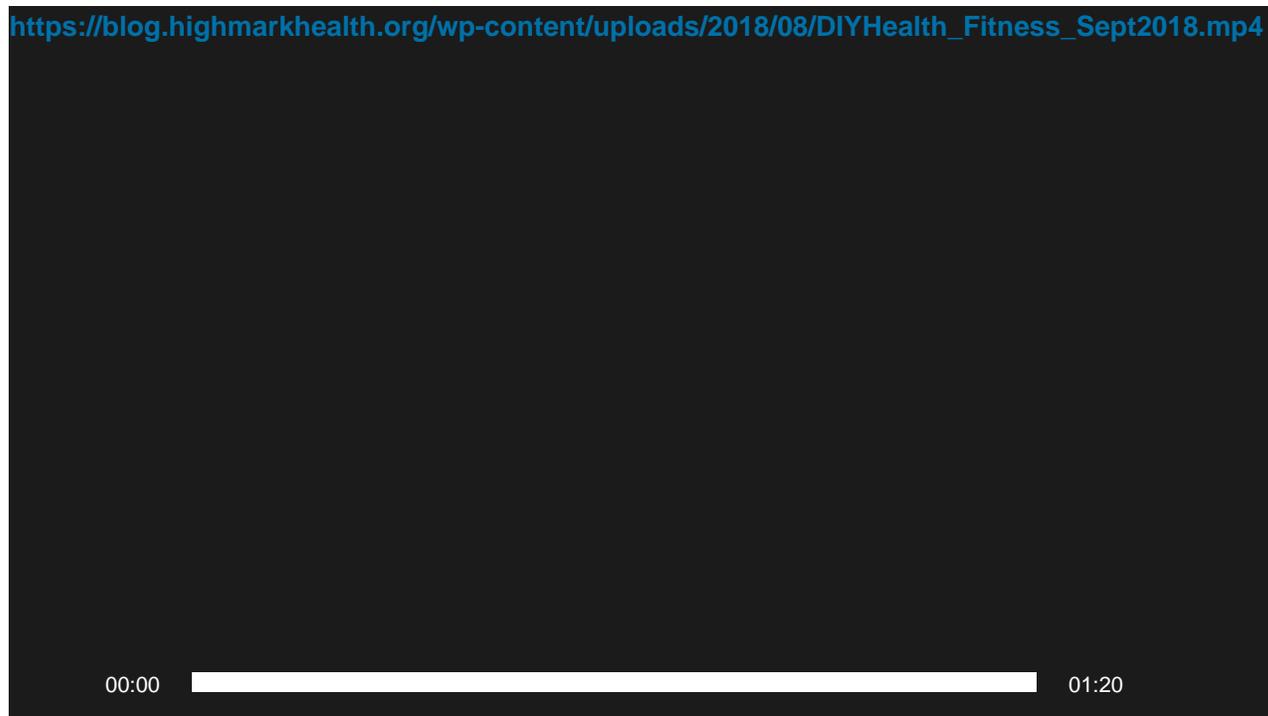
## Exercise

Exercise and active play are also essential in ensuring healthy weight maintenance for children. Kids who develop healthy exercise habits early on are more likely to continue with regular physical activity into adulthood, which can prevent the onset of obesity and related chronic conditions like Type 2 diabetes and hypertension.

The **Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans** recommend that children and adolescents ages 6-17 engage in at least one

hour of physical activity each day, and include aerobic, muscle-strengthening, and bone-strengthening activities. Ensure that your children are meeting these daily recommendations by minimizing screen time, encouraging team sports, setting up play dates, and doing activities as a family. This month's **Move for Health handout** and video feature five fun examples of exercises children can do on their own or with friends and family. If you're looking for more ideas, check out our inspiration for these exercises at [fit.WebMD.com](http://fit.WebMD.com) and [JohnsonFitness.com](http://JohnsonFitness.com).

[https://blog.highmarkhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/DIYHealth\\_Fitness\\_Sept2018.mp4](https://blog.highmarkhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/DIYHealth_Fitness_Sept2018.mp4)



**Frog Jump**

**Alligator Crawl**

**Jump Rope**

**Airplane**

**Inchworm**

## Stress

You may think of stress as primarily an adult problem, but it turns out that **stress is also a major risk factor for obesity in children**. Additionally, early life stress has been shown to negatively impact brain development in areas that govern executive functions, such as behavioral inhibition, and rewards systems, such as the desire to partake in pleasurable activities, like consuming food.

Some examples of early life stress related to obesity include irregular family meal times, limited healthy food access, food

insecurity, and poor eating habits of caregivers. Stressful events, lack of normal routine, and feelings of stress in children are often associated with decreased levels of physical activity, which may increase obesity risk. To minimize stress for children, it is important to establish healthy eating practices and routines, such as regularly preparing meals together and setting consistent meal times. As with other healthy behaviors, when adult caregivers practice healthy eating habits it sets the stage for children to develop similarly healthy habits.

## Sleep

**Inadequate sleep is another factor that is correlated to weight gain in children.** Depending on their age, children should sleep anywhere between 8 and 12 hours per night. When our bodies do not have ample time to rest and restore at night, our hormone regulation can become impaired. Two hormones regulate our eating — ghrelin is the “hunger hormone” telling us when it is time to eat, and leptin is the “full hormone” telling us when to stop eating. **When our bodies are sleep deprived, we produce more ghrelin and less leptin** — which can lead to overeating and weight gain. Other side effects of sleep deprivation include impaired focus and concentration at school, as well as behavioral and mental health problems.

Three quick tips for parents to help children get adequate sleep each night: establish a set bedtime; create a relaxing bedtime routine; and implement media curfews for cellphones and computers.

## Environment

**A supportive environment can make a big difference** in helping kids successfully adopt healthy habits into a daily routine. Although families are not always in control of all aspects of their environments, it’s important to focus on ways that they can create a more supportive environment for kids to learn and cultivate the healthy habits that lead to optimal health and prevention of chronic disease. A few places to start:

- Pursue schools and after-school programs that prioritize physical activity and healthy lunches/snacks
- Find safe areas for children to play such as community parks or trails
- Seek farmers’ markets or grocery stores that offer affordable healthy food options



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