

Preventing obesity with mindful eating

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Traditional advice for helping families ensure their children and teens maintain a healthy weight begins with a focus on balancing calories consumed from food and beverages with calories used through physical activity and growth. Dr. Lenna Liu, a pediatrician at Seattle Children's Odessa Brown Children's Clinic and Child Wellness Clinic, uses a slightly different approach to support families with the complex issue of weight management. She starts by encouraging families to adopt a mindful approach to eating.

In observance of National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month, Seattle Children's asked Dr. Liu to explain [mindful eating](#) and give tips for how to create a positive environment in which to enjoy [food](#) to fuel our bodies.

"Mindful eating is a more compassionate and holistic way to approach [healthy eating](#)," said Liu. "It not only focuses on what foods we eat, but on how our bodies feel. It allows us to pay attention to hunger and fullness, emotional connections to food and the relationships involved in eating."

Mindful eating focuses on positives, rather than focusing on food restriction, counting calories and watching the scale for weight control.

Getting started with mindful eating

Reflect on your emotional connections to food. Do you turn to food for comfort or when you're stressed? Does your [child](#) swing by the kitchen

for a snack during a commercial every time they're watching TV? Examine your family's habits around eating. Better awareness of eating habits allows you to think of alternatives to reaching for food when you're feeling an emotion, or are trying to unwind, but aren't truly hungry.

Physical hunger comes on slowly, while the urge to eat due to emotions comes on suddenly and urgently. Learn how to tune in to your body and feel the difference, without guilt or judgement, and teach your child to do the same.

Consciously work to think of food as necessary for physical and emotional health and well-being. Teach your child that food gives them energy to play, learn, think and grow. It's the fuel they need when they feel hungry.

When thinking of food in this way, it's easier to understand that what you choose to eat impacts your health. It's reinforcement for following the traditional advice of shopping the outer aisles of the grocery store, filling at least half of the plate with fruits and vegetables and choosing water over sugary drinks.

Create a warm, caring and supportive environment

Relationships to food and the environment in which families eat and live impact how they eat and how they feel about themselves. When family members feel secure and loved, they're better able to pay attention to their bodies. Liu provided these tips for creating a warm, caring and supportive environment:

- Lead by example and show body acceptance for yourself, your child and others. Avoid the words overweight, obesity, fat, thin and diet. Instead, talk about health, feeling good and being able

to do the things that bring joy.

- Grow your child's appreciation for healthy foods by having them join you at the grocery store or farmer's market and then preparing meals together.
- Eat together as a family and engage in positive conversation. This helps everyone to slow down and pay attention to what they're eating. It also allows time to recognize when your body feels hungry or full.
- Use the division of responsibility approach. The parent provides healthy food and drinks on a regular schedule. The child decides whether to eat and how much. Remember that eating patterns change as children grow and develop.
- If your child asks you if they're overweight, ask why they're wondering or what they think. Be nurturing and sensitive. Visit your child's doctor to check in on their growth. In the meantime, ask your child to think of ideas for making better choices for health as a family.
- If your child's doctor is concerned with your child's weight, work to set health and wellness goals based on what motivates your child, their interests and their strengths. Involve the whole family in working toward better health, rather than singling out one child.
- Make small, gradual changes and sustain them over time. Healthy living is a process.

Make mindful eating a habit

Mindful eating is one piece of establishing healthy lifestyle habits that help prevent obesity and the resulting health effects.

"There is so much stigma around weight, and judgement around right and wrong eating behavior, and good and bad food in our culture," said Liu. "Mindful eating fills in gaps in the traditional approach of

discussing [weight management](#)."

Provided by Seattle Children's Research Institute

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