

Healthier habits handbook

Resource document for adolescents living with overweight or obesity

One in four school-aged children and one in four adolescents are living with overweight or obesity in the WHO European Region.

If you are concerned about your weight and would like some practical advice, then this fact sheet is for you.



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What is obesity?

- Obesity is a complex disease defined by excessive fat in the body that may impair health.
- Living with overweight increases the risk of developing obesity.

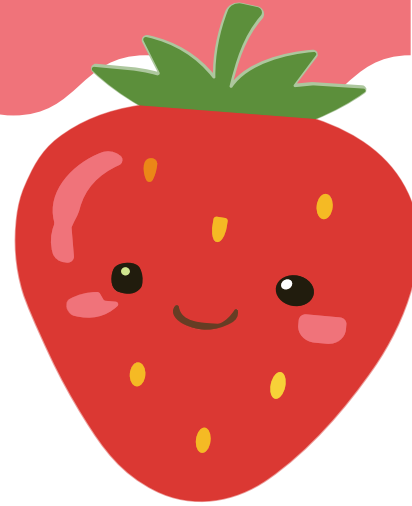
Why do some people have obesity?

- Having overweight or obesity is not your fault
- Obesity is influenced by multiple factors: unhealthy living environments; biological, metabolic or genetic (inherited) factors; as well as health education, psychology and mental health
- These days, most people live in environments that promote unhealthy eating and make it hard to be physically active and contribute to poor sleep and stress



- Some childhood events such as family conflicts, trauma or stress at school such as harassment or bullying may also contribute to behaviours that can lead to weight gain
- Sometimes obesity can be caused by certain medication or diseases, including genetic diseases

What might you experience living with obesity?



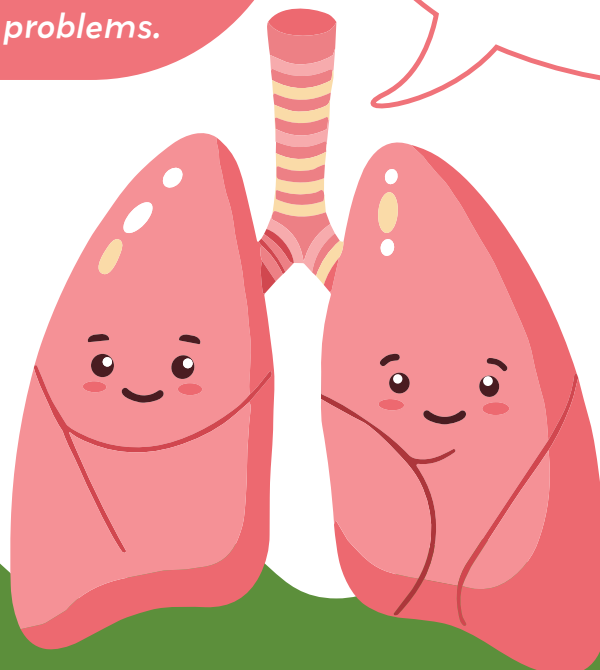
Excess weight can present challenges, for example:

- You might struggle to run or jump without breathing difficulties or pain;
- You may find it hard to join in with physical activities, sports or exercise; or
- You may feel lonely, and that it is affecting your quality of life.

Obesity may affect your heart and vessels, lungs, stomach and intestines, liver, kidneys, muscle and bones, skin, teeth, hormones, brain, mood and well-being.

Therefore, your doctor or healthcare professional may do some tests to look for these health problems.

IF YOU EXPERIENCE ANY OF THESE DIFFICULTIES, IT IS IMPORTANT TO TALK WITH YOUR PARENTS, A DOCTOR OR OTHER HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONAL.



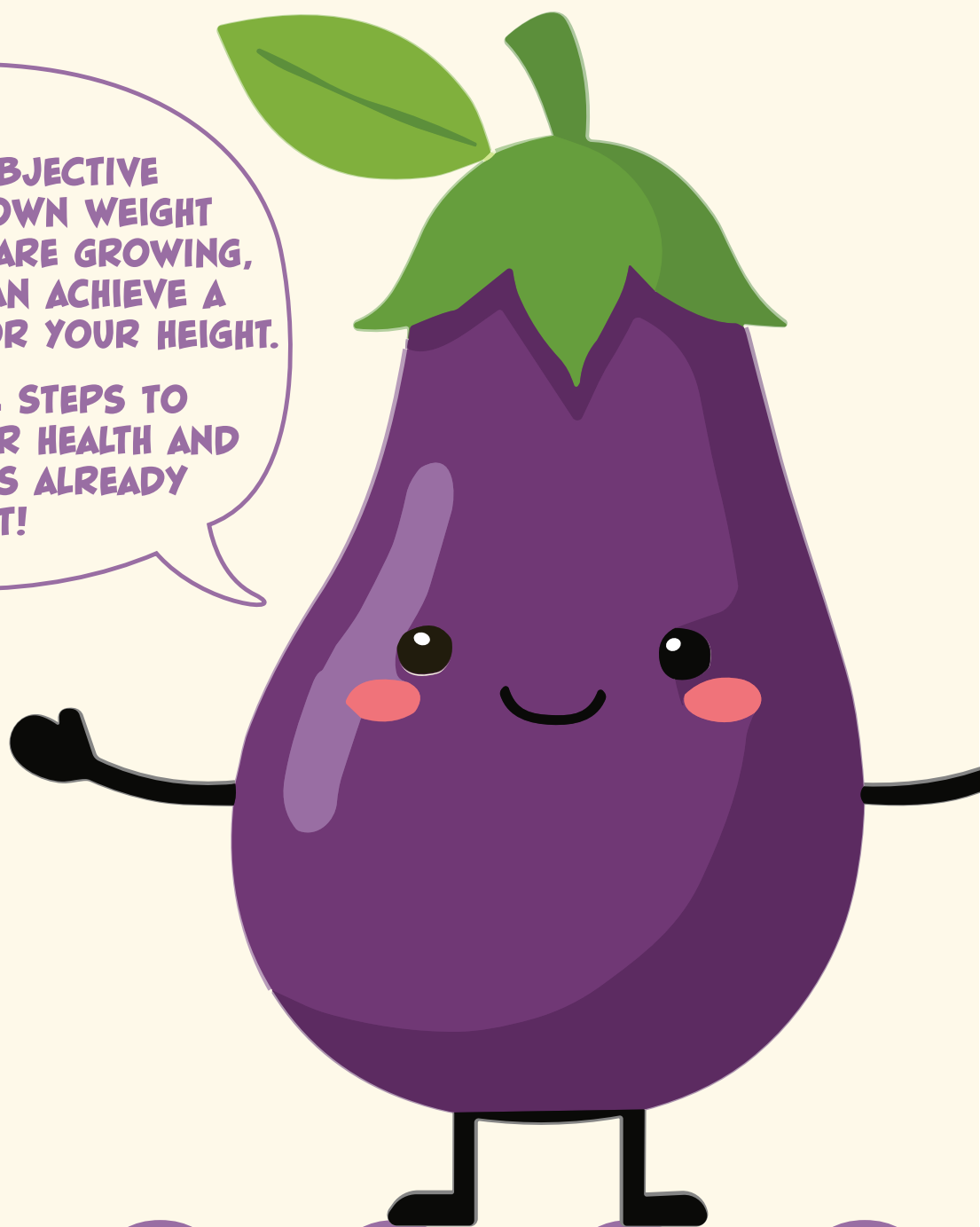
Obesity may persist throughout adult life, which may increase the risk of developing other diseases, so it is important to look for help and treatment early.

The aims of treatment are to:

- **Improve your health and well-being;**
- **Reduce the amount of fatty tissue in your body; and**
- **Optimize any of your habits and those of your family that may contribute to your weight gain.**

**THE FIRST OBJECTIVE
IS TO SLOW DOWN WEIGHT
GAIN WHILE YOU ARE GROWING,
SO THAT YOU CAN ACHIEVE A
HEALTHY WEIGHT FOR YOUR HEIGHT.**

**TAKING SMALL STEPS TO
IMPROVING YOUR HEALTH AND
WELL-BEING IS ALREADY
A LOT!**



How to treat obesity?

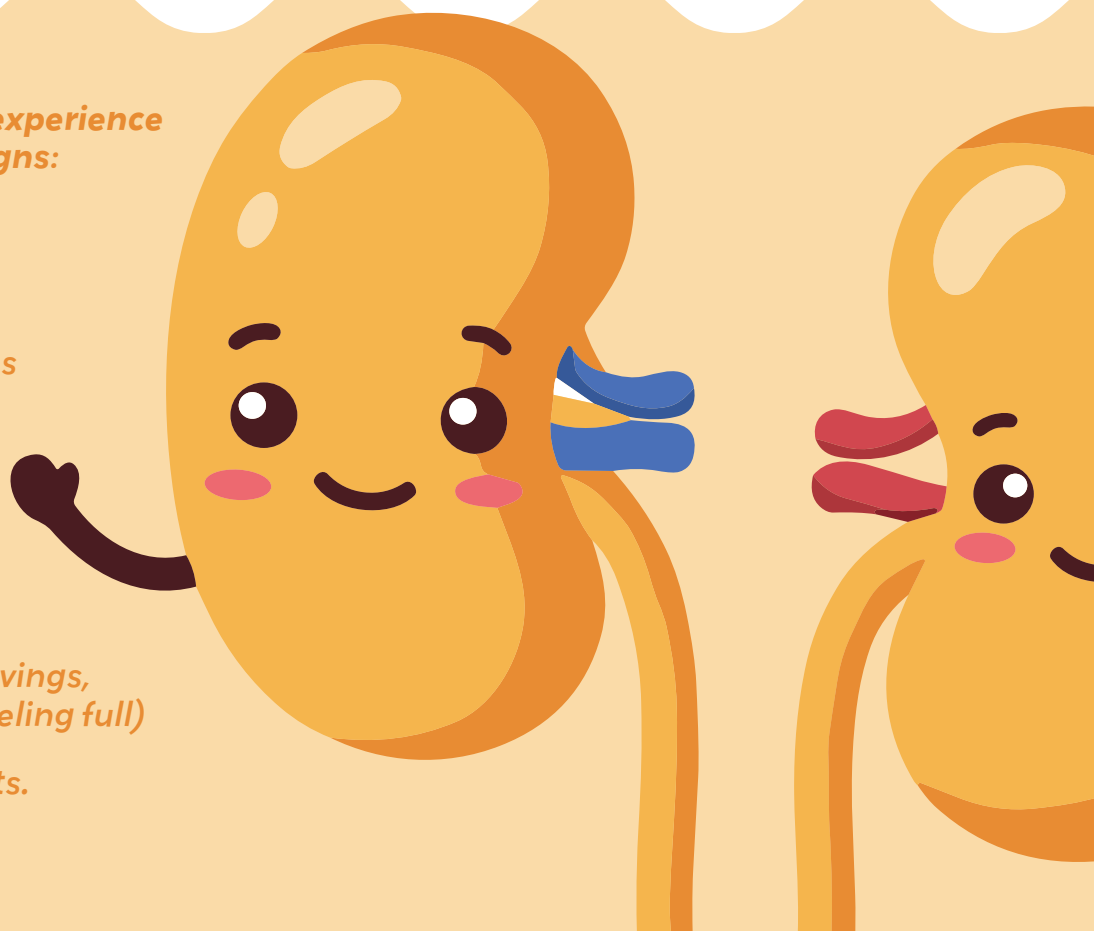
Your family should be involved to support your efforts.

Different types of treatment may be proposed by your doctor and ideally by other health-care providers such as nurses, dietitians, exercise or sport professionals, physiotherapists, psychologists and/or psychiatrists:

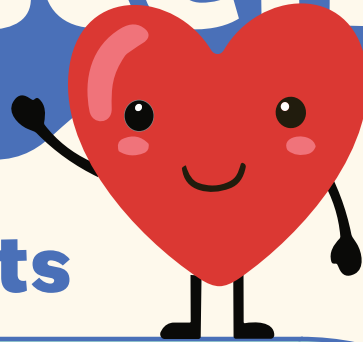
- **Behavioural interventions aim to change your habits and those of your family, including encouraging healthy eating habits, increasing physical activity (through both active travel such as walking or cycling, as well as more organized exercise and sports) and reducing screen and sedentary time;**
- **Psychological treatments that may be proposed according to individual needs; these can include counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy or family therapy;**
- **Medication: in some countries, doctors can prescribe medication if behavioural interventions are not effective on their own. Medication is always used as a complement to behavioural changes; or**
- **Surgery: in some cases, your doctor may refer you to a multidisciplinary team of specialists to consider metabolic or bariatric surgery (a safe operation on your stomach and intestine).**

Tell your doctor if you experience any of the following signs:

- * *fatigue*
- * *disturbed sleep*
- * *breathing difficulties*
- * *joint or muscle pain*
- * *stress*
- * *low mood, sadness, anxiety, loneliness*
- * *strong appetite (cravings, overeating, never feeling full)*
- * *any other complaints.*



Practical Tips for Adolescents



1. Build healthy habits

- Be patient, because building healthy habits requires time, effort and support from those who care about you.
- Choose one or two realistic goals at a time that you can maintain in the long term. Goals can be changed or adapted over time.
- Focus on building healthy habits to increase your physical fitness and strength, improve your sleep, to help you participate in the activities you want to do and to feel good about yourself.
- Do not accept any weight-related bullying and teasing at home or at school; tell your parents or your teachers if this happens.



2. Eat healthily

What you need to know:

- Healthy eating is important for the functioning of your body, independent of your body size, weight or health.
- It helps to protect you against diseases later in life, such as diabetes, diseases of the heart and vessels, and cancers.
- Stress can influence eating behaviours (cravings, overeating, never feeling full).
- No food is forbidden, but the consumption of foods and drinks containing high amounts of sugars, fats and salt should be limited.
- Water should be your main beverage.



HUNGER

IS WHAT YOU FEEL WHEN YOUR BODY NEEDS TO EAT (EMPTY SENSATION, GURLING, FATIGUE OR IRRITABILITY). KEEP LISTENING TO THE SIGNALS OF YOUR BODY.

SATIETY

(FEELING SATISFIED) IS WHAT YOU FEEL WHEN YOUR STOMACH IS FULL. THIS FEELING MAY APPEAR LATE IF YOU EAT TOO QUICKLY. TO HELP YOUR BRAIN TO LISTEN FOR SATIETY SIGNALS FROM YOUR GUT, YOU SHOULD SLOW DOWN WHEN YOU ARE EATING AND INCREASE THE NUMBER OF CHEWS FOR EACH MOUTHFUL OF FOOD.

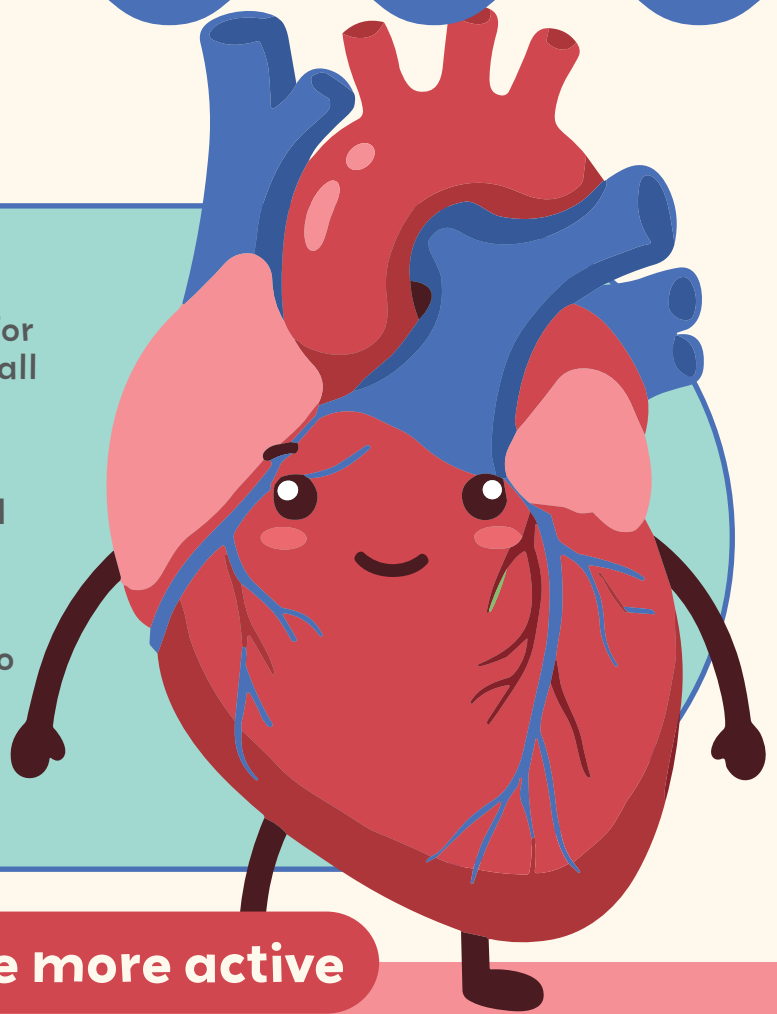
Practical tips to aim for healthier eating

- Eat three main meals and 1 – 2 healthy snacks per day.
- Listen to internal cues for hunger and satiety. Eat slowly and mindfully.
- Taste new foods or foods you do not like, even a very small quantity, to get used to it.
- Limit your portion sizes for both meals and healthy snacks. Start with small servings, wait 20 minutes and take more only if you are still hungry. One plate per main meal is usually sufficient.
- Eat a variety of vegetables and fruits, preferably fresh, local and in-season. At least five portions (the size of your hand) per day are recommended.
- Eat starchy foods (e.g. potatoes, wholegrain bread, pasta and rice) several times per day because they are an important and healthy source of energy and nutrients.
- Replace fatty meat and meat products (e.g. sausages) with legumes (e.g. lentils, chickpeas, beans), fish, poultry or lean meat.
- Milk and other dairy products (e.g. plain yogurt, kefir, cheese) are very important for your growth and bone health: three to five portions per day are recommended at your age. Choose reduced-fat alternatives to lower your fat intake.
- Avoid beverages containing free sugars (e.g. soft drinks, fruit or vegetable juices and drinks, liquid and powder concentrates, flavoured water, energy and sports drinks, ready-to-drink tea, ready-to-drink coffee and flavoured milk drinks).
- Limit your intake of:
 - foods containing high amounts of sugars (e.g. sugary snacks, candies, cookies, chocolates, chocolate bars, ice cream, ketchup);
 - baked and fried foods (e.g. French fries, nuggets, chips, doughnuts, cakes, pies, wafers); and
 - foods containing high amounts of salt (e.g. ready meals; bacon, ham and salami; cheese; and salty snacks) and salty condiments (e.g. soy sauce, fish sauce and bouillon).
- Avoid eating while watching screens (television/tablet/computer/telephone) or other distractions (mindless eating).
- Be mindful when eating and notice if you are still hungry (e.g. ask for a container to pack away leftover food).
- Do not skip meals or reduce your food intake excessively. If you restrict your diet too much, your brain and hormones will naturally defend against weight loss and promote weight regain by increasing appetite.
- If you want to eat something between meals while you are not really hungry, try to drink some water, tea (without sugar) or reduced-fat milk or, eat raw vegetables or fresh fruit. Do something that you enjoy (listening to some music, reading, taking a bath, going out for a walk, contacting a friend).

3. Be active

What you need to know:

- Physical activity provides benefits for your development, health and overall well-being.
- Physical activity can also have beneficial effects on your heart and vessels, lungs, bones and muscles, brain and body fat.
- Children and adolescents should do at least an average of 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous-intensity, mostly aerobic, physical activity, across the week.



Practical tips to aim to be more active

- Avoid activities that cause acute pain or discomfort.
- Non-weight bearing activities may be a good start, such as water activities, cycling, rowing, etc.
- Enjoy activities involving movement with your friends or family.
- Walk, cycle or take a non-motorized scooter to school.
- Take part in physical education classes and school sports activities.
- Go outside regularly (e.g. to the park, a sports club or a youth centre).
- Help with household chores (e.g. clean your room, do some recycling, do the dishes).
- Use the stairs instead of lifts or escalators.
- Break up long periods of sitting by getting up and moving every 30–60 minutes — it adds up more than you think.
- Choose activities that you think are fun and safe.
- Doing some active play and physical activity is better than doing none – and more is better.

3. Reduce your screen time and improve your sleep



What you need to know:

- You expend little energy sitting in front of a screen and this can lead to weight gain.
- Higher amounts of screen time (e.g. watching or using a television, computer, tablet, video game console or phone) are also associated with poor health and lack of sleep.
- You may be more likely to overeat when eating in front of screens.
- During televised programmes and movies for your age or on social media, there are numerous advertisements on food items high in sugar, fat and salt. These advertisements can influence you to buy and eat products that are less good for your health.
- Watching a screen just before bedtime can interfere with the quality of your sleep, which is essential for your growth, learning capacity, memory and immunity. Lack of sleep has been linked to mental health problems, poor growth, obesity and excessive weight gain, and reduced school performance.

Practical tips to be active

- Limit your screen time, particularly before bedtime; turn off devices one hour before sleep.
- Turn off the television when no one is watching; turn it only when you plan to watch it.
- Turn off screens during meals; do not eat in front of the screen.
- Leave your phone/tablet out of your room for the night (use an alarm clock for waking up rather than your phone).
- Set up a consistent sleeping schedule and create bedtime rituals.
- Make sure your bedroom is dark, quiet and cool.



Additional references

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