

Behavioral Measures for Weight Loss

Get moving. When youngsters take off weight through dieting alone, 80 percent of the loss is from fatty tissue and 20 percent is from muscle. Adding weight-resistance training to an exercise routine preserves the muscle tissue. Virtually every ounce dropped comes from fat. Once an adolescent meets her goal, regular exercise is essential for maintaining the desired weight.

Limit TV viewing to one hour per day. Not only does television promote snacking and take up time that could better be spent exercising, it turns out to have another pernicious effect on weight. Researchers at Tennessee's Memphis State University have discovered watching television contributes to weight gain by slowing down metabolism. They assigned children of normal weight to one group, obese boys and girls to another group. All the youngsters had their metabolic rates measured twice: once while resting and once while watching TV. The findings clearly showed that participants expended significantly more energy while resting than while sitting mesmerized by the tube.

Avoid temptation. Watching television is just one activity that may trigger an urge to eat. Help your teen eliminate as many of those situations as he can. For example, if his morning walk to school takes him past Donut Galaxy, severely taxing his resistance, suggest that he travel an alternate route.

One way to identify unhealthy eating triggers is for the overweight youngster to keep a journal, in which he writes down the food he ate, where he ate it, the time of day and—extremely important—his reasons for eating. Did he devour two slices of meatball pizza after school because he was truly hungry or because he simply wanted to hang out at the pizza parlor with his friends? If he gives the latter reason, perhaps next time he and his buddies split a pizza, he could consciously choose to “nurse” a single slice, even if everyone else grabs two.

Give positive reinforcement. When goals are reached, reward your teen with a small present, tickets to a show—whatever would elicit a proud grin—and, of course, plenty of compliments. In addition, help your teen set realistic, short-term goals that allow for more chance for success.

Look for help if you and your teen can't manage his weight problem on your own. There are several types of programs designed specifically for adolescents. “You're likely to find them available through local hospitals, schools, community centers and YMCA/YWCAs,” says Dr. Sigman. “They're worth seeking out.”

Medically Supervised, Multidisciplinary Programs

In recognition of the fact that obese adolescents often have to radically change their lifestyles in order to *keep* the weight off, this type of program features a team approach, with a physician, a registered dietitian, an exercise specialist and a mental health professional all involved in each case. Psychological counseling might address issues that may have preceded or in some way contributed to a young person's gaining weight. For example, food can be a source of love and comfort to a child who feels emotionally deprived.

Peer Support Groups

These “self-help” groups, led by an adult facilitator, give overweight youngsters an opportunity to share their feelings in front of other kids who truly understand. Members swap suggestions for losing weight and support one another's progress.

Commercial Weight-Loss Programs

Commercial chains generally attract an adult clientele, which may not appeal to teens. It's difficult to state definitively how effective these programs are, since they rarely make such statistics public. Attrition rates, though, tend to be high. In one independent study, half the attendees in a particular weight loss regimen dropped out after just six weeks; by week twelve, fewer than one third remained.

Weight-Loss Summer Camps

These camps combine summer fun with education on how to eat healthy, and how to *keep* eating that way when it's time to return home. The meals, planned by a dietitian/nutritionist, are low in fat and calories but not drastically different from those served at regular camps, and the physical activity level is very high. Typically, camps report weight losses on the order of fifteen to fifty pounds. The boost to a teen's confidence, though, can be immeasurable.

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