



# Monthly Health Watch



News With a Monthly Health Theme

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**Media Contact:** Wendy Morpew 212.987.3846 MorpewWS@aetna.com

## **Aetna offers tips to combat childhood obesity for National Nutrition Month**

*By Wendy Richards, MD, MBA, Aetna National Medical Director, Childhood Obesity Initiative*

March is National Nutrition Month. It is a good time to focus on what our children are eating. We can help them make smart choices. We can also encourage them to be physically active. These actions will make them feel better now and reduce their risk of chronic disease later.

It is not easy to talk to children about being overweight. This is especially tough for parents who struggle with their own weight. And some parents do not know that overweight children face serious health risks. Many believe or hope that their child will simply "grow out of it."

### **Body mass index: A good way to talk to kids about change**

Body mass index is a calculation based on height and weight that takes age and gender into account. Your child's doctor can give you a healthy range for your child. The doctor can also let you know what a high body mass index means to your child's health. You can calculate your child's body mass index at [www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi).

Using the body mass index helps parents talk to their kids about a healthy body. It avoids the distress that can arise when kids compare their weight with the weights of siblings and friends.

### **Is early intervention an answer?**

According to the Alliance for a Healthier Generation:

- Nearly one in three kids and teens in America is currently obese or overweight.
- One in three children born after the year 2000 will develop diabetes, partly due to diet.
- Obese children and adolescents are more likely to be obese as adults.

**The good news:** Obesity is a preventable risk factor for chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, asthma and heart disease.

**The bad news:** Many children are not treated for obesity until a health complication occurs.

Aetna is addressing this problem by working with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation ([www.healthiergeneration.org](http://www.healthiergeneration.org)). Several Aetna customers are piloting a program that offers insurance coverage for nutritional counseling and weight management, even if the child does not have a related health condition. Doctors, children, and parents receive tools and resources to support their efforts to change. We hope to show that early intervention succeeds in bringing the child to a healthy weight in order to avoid future health problems.

## Parenting tips to prevent obesity

You can find ideas for combating obesity at IntelliHealth, Aetna's online source of trusted health information developed with Harvard Medical School.

Claire McCarthy, MD, offers a host of tips in her article "[Parenting to Prevent Obesity.](#)" Here is a brief overview:<sup>1</sup>

- **Your child's opinion matters.**  
Do not force healthy food, but work with your child's likes.
- **Set an example.**  
It won't work to tell your kids to snack on fruit if you never do yourself.
- **Watch your words.**  
Don't call your child fat, or make comparisons to other kids' weight.
- **Make exercise easy and fun.**  
Build it into daily activities. Make a game of it.
- **The whole family should be on the same diet.**  
That means soda, chips and cookies aren't healthy for anyone.

The full article is available at [www.intelihealth.com/preventobesity](http://www.intelihealth.com/preventobesity)

## Aetna community programs combat childhood obesity

Action at the local level is crucial to address any health care challenge. Aetna organizes and funds a number of programs:

- We work with groups to address the causes of childhood obesity.
- We work with groups to engage kids to make healthy food and fitness fun.
- We work with groups to identify and share best practices.

Aetna created [www.communityvitality.com](http://www.communityvitality.com) with Magic Johnson Enterprises (MJE). Visitors find a virtual fast food restaurant that shows the calories in common menu items. (And how much exercise it takes to burn them off.)

<http://www.aetna.com/news/newsReleases/2008/0123.html>

Aetna and MJE launched 3-Point Play<sup>SM</sup> in 2009. This is a 20-week nutrition and exercise competition between fourth- and fifth-graders at five elementary schools in Houston.

[http://www.aetna.com/news/newsReleases/2009/0112\\_3\\_Point\\_Play.html](http://www.aetna.com/news/newsReleases/2009/0112_3_Point_Play.html)

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