

a weighty topic

Helping children maintain a healthy weight bodes well for their future

It used to be, an overweight child was the rarity. Today, roughly one out of every three children is either overweight or obese. According to pediatrician Dr. Alina Olteanu, director of “The Weigh of Life” program at Tulane Hospital in New Orleans, 30 percent of children in Louisiana are overweight or obese, and the same percentage applies to kids in New Orleans. Over the past three decades, researchers have watched this trend transfer from childhood to adolescence to adulthood.

While childhood health problems like colds, stomach viruses and ear infections go away with no lingering health concerns, obesity in a child supports development of “adult diseases” seen in overweight adults such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. The combination of excess weight, high blood pressure and high cholesterol is a recipe for development of heart disease.

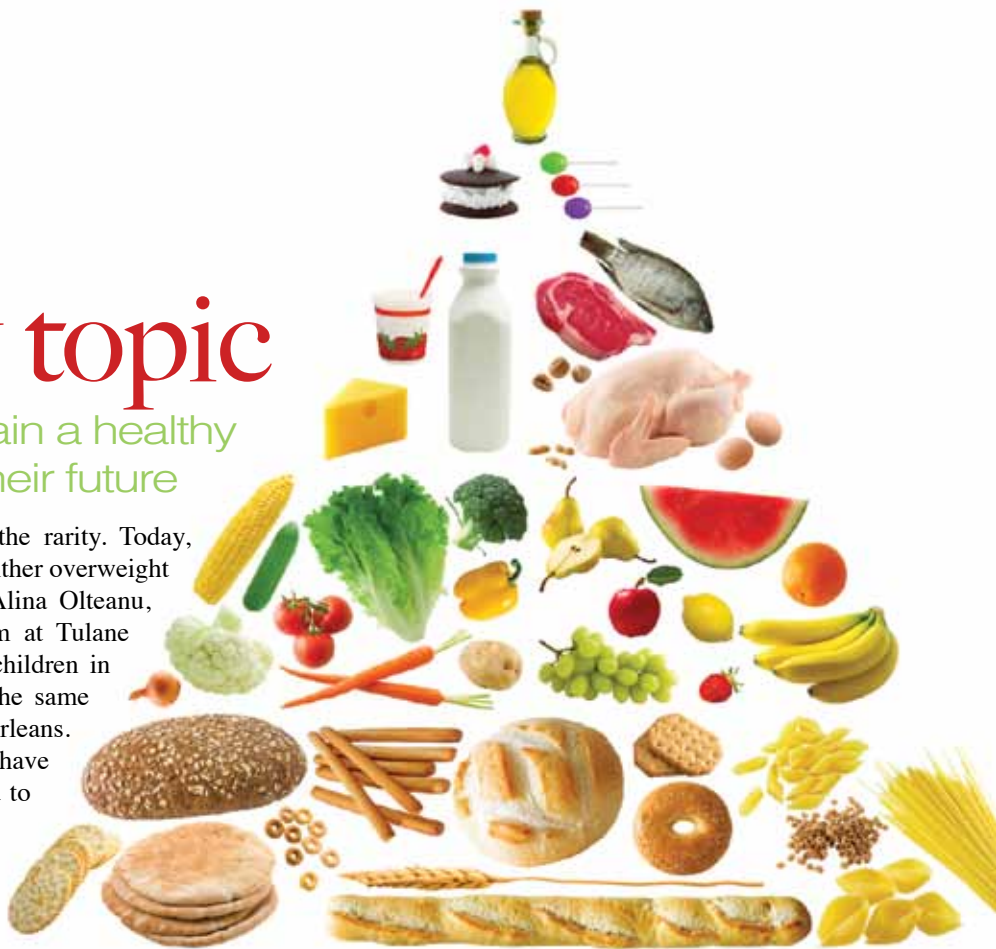
Researchers have noted that overeating and physical inactivity are two behaviors learned early in life that contribute to development of heart disease. In view of these health concerns, the earlier in life that health promoting habits are started, the earlier they’ll become a regular routine.

control vs. loss

The primary goal with a child is proper growth and development. With this in mind, weight “control” is the focus rather than weight “loss”. The first goal is to reduce the rate of weight gain and/or maintain weight while the child grows taller. Over time, the amount of weight for the child’s height will be improved.

Just as we must learn the ABCs to read and write, we need to develop a nutritious meal plan needs for growth, development and weight control. Success involves including favorite foods as part of the meal plan and snacks along with the ability of the family and/or caregivers to stick with the plan.

Dr. Olteanu suggests using MyPyramid for Kids developed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for a reliable and safe guideline for meal planning. This was designed for children ages six to 11 years old. The pyramid includes a variety of foods from the following groups: grains, vegetables, fruits, milk, meat, and beans. The recommended amounts of food for an 1,800 calorie intake are



featured. The amounts of food for several calorie levels are available if needed. Ask your pediatrician for a copy or visit pyramid.org.

Additionally, Dr. Olteanu also recommends The American Academy of Pediatrics website (aap.org) for reliable nutrition guidelines. She uses a practice in her office to manage weight in children of which a version is noted on the AAP website. She calls it “5-2-1-0”. Each point has a meaning for preventing obesity: a minimum of five fruits and vegetables per day; fewer than two hours of screen time (includes TV, computer, screen toys); greater than one hour of physical activity per day; and no sugar-sweetened beverages (including soft drinks, punch, Kool-Aid, lemonade, and ice tea).

These points are very familiar to Cassandra Daniels, a New Orleans fulltime working mom with a seven-year-old daughter who is slightly overweight. Cassandra has decided to help her

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daughter learn good nutrition habits at this young age. Not only does she try to enforce the points noted above, but she also reinforces smaller portions, less candy, more water, and fast food limited to once per week. She cannot control her daughter’s calorie intake when they are apart so she hopes regular reinforcement of good nutrition tips will result in natural habits. She has also begun to encourage her daughter to

be more active with outdoor play and jump roping. They work as a team to figure what is best for both of them to reach the ultimate goal of managing her weight.

community support

Participating in local programs is a great way to introduce you and your child to the world of food. The Edible Schoolyard at the Samuel J. Green Charter School is an innovative program for kindergarteners through eighth grade students. Classroom lessons involve hands-on experiences in the garden. At various times, tours, gardening and cooking classes are open to the community for kids and adults. Every aspect of the garden's care is presented from planning to planting, harvesting and cooking meals. Volunteer activities are available too. To inquire about upcoming activities, visit esynola.org. Any of their programs will give you and your child a positive appreciation for food.

Before starting a weight management program with a child, always begin with a visit to the pediatrician to evaluate your child's condition. With an appropriate starting point and proper advice, it's easy to achieve adequate growth and development along with weight management.

Kim Hemenway M.S., L.D.N., R.D. has been a Registered Dietitian for 23 years, providing medical nutrition therapy to infants, children, adolescents, and adults in hospitals and other healthcare facilities. In addition to presenting nutrition education classes to the community, she has a 10-year-history of teaching Basic Nutrition classes at local colleges in the New Orleans area.



10 meal-time tips for success with weight management:

1. Involve children in the food shopping and meal preparation.
2. Choose meals that reflect calorie control
3. Eat slowly. Putting down your fork or spoon between bites will help.
4. Chew each bite of food very well.
5. Stop eating when full.
6. Stretch meal time to 20 – 30 minutes.
7. Don't watch TV, read, or play a game during meal time.
8. Pick one spot where all meals and snacks will be eaten.
9. Do not pick up food and walk around while eating.
10. Do not take second portions.