Focus On
Healthy weight in childhood

Why is it important to have a healthy weight?

Excess weight is a major risk factor for chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes, some musculoskeletal conditions and cancers\(^1\).

The higher the level of excess weight a person carries regardless their age, the higher their risk of developing health and wellbeing issues. Obesity in childhood is associated with early onset of chronic diseases, a higher chance of obesity, low self-esteem leading to psychosocial problems, disability and premature death in adulthood\(^1,2\). The main cause of overweight and obesity is often an imbalance in energy intake versus energy use leading to a positive energy balance over a prolonged period of time\(^2\). Frequent intake of discretionary foods such as fast food, snacks, confectionery, sugary drinks, excess portion sizes, lack of physical activity and a sedentary life style are some of the contributory factors to a positive energy balance\(^2,3\).

Underweight, although not as prevalent as overweight or obesity in Australia, also leads to poor growth and development, decreased immunity leading to frequent infections and premature death\(^4\).

Therefore, it is important that all children are encouraged to maintain a healthy body weight for their age to ensure normal growth and development, reduced risk of short- and long-term illness and death\(^4\).

The picture in the ACT

Trends over time

The ACT Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey (ACTPANS) is a health survey that has been conducted every 3 years since 2006. Around 1500 Year 6 students from primary schools across the ACT participate in ACTPANS each time. Information about physical activity, nutrition and weight status are collected. Height and weight are also measured by trained professionals in a private setting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Overall prevalence (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
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For males, there has been a significant decline in prevalence of overweight and obesity from 27.8% in 2006 to 17.4% in 2018, however, the proportion of overweight and obese females has been stable over the same period (Figure 1).

How do we assess healthy weight?

Body Mass Index (BMI) is the most common measure used to assess weight status at a population level. Factors such as muscle mass, ethnicity, and puberty can all affect BMI; however, these factors average out across a large number of people.

BMI is calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by height, in metres squared. For children, the BMI value is plotted against the World Health Organization’s BMI for age (5-19 years) growth reference charts.

For statistical analysis, we have used, Cole and Lobstein’s\(^5\) BMI cut offs based on the reformulated International Obesity Task Force (IOTF) childhood BMI cut-offs for overweight, obesity and thinness.

Figure 1: Overweight and obesity, ACT Year 6 students
(Source: ACTPANS 2006-2018)
The difference in the prevalence of healthy weight between male and female Year 6 students is not statistically significant in 2018.

**What are we doing to help?**

Future surveys will continue to provide important insights into the health and wellbeing status of ACT children. Results to date highlight the importance of continued implementation of health and wellbeing programs at the population level and in school settings with a focus on:

- Reducing unhealthy food and drink consumption
- Reinforcing importance of healthy eating habits
- Improving physical activity, including reducing sedentary behaviours
- Building knowledge and capacity in children, parents and school communities.

The ACT Government has several initiatives in place to improve the health and wellbeing of the young people in the ACT. Click on the icons below to find out more about these programs.

**For personalised advice from a dietitian:**


Alternatively, you can choose a dietitian using Dietitians Association Australia's Find and Accredited Practising dietitian webpage [https://daa.asn.au/find-an-apd](https://daa.asn.au/find-an-apd). Fees may apply for this service.

**References**


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### Distribution by sex

![BMI by gender, ACT Year 6 students 2018](image)

**Figure 2:** BMI by gender, ACT Year 6 students (Source: ACTPANS 2018)

ACT Government Position Statement on Eating Disorders