



## Doc TALK

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## Does this make me look fat?

## DocTalk by Heather Bagley, Pediatric Nurse Practitioner

Healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes. Just like we all vary in our height and hair color, we also vary in body shape and size. The Body Mass Index (BMI) is used as an indicator of body fatness and although it is fairly reliable, it is only a screening tool and does not tell the whole story.

Unfortunately, we live in a society that is littered with powerful media messages about what we should look like. One large research study among 9-14 year-olds reported "the strongest influence on whether they had concerns about their weight was the media, followed by parents and peers" (Field et al., 2001).

Everyone, at some point in their life, has wished to change something about their body, but part of being happy is accepting your body and appearance. Parents can play a key role in how chil-

dren view themselves and their bodies. More than likely a child/adolescent already has worries about how their body looks, and they need feel loved and accepted by those closest to them regardless of body weight or size.

Families that follow the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) guidelines of consuming 5 servings of fruits/ vegetables per day, participating in 1 hour or more of physical activity, and limiting amounts of sugary drinks will be healthier and more likely to maintain healthy fat levels.

Although excessive adipose tissue is unhealthy, so is not enough. In people's drive to be thin, some resort to unhealthy dieting, excessive exercise, or unhealthy weight training. Some will develop eating disorders. Being too thin is also unhealthy. Fat is needed to absorb vitamins, insulate the body, provide energy, and help cells function properly. Just as being taller or shorter is not viewed as "good" or "bad", nei-

ther should weighing more or less be viewed that way.

When you eat right and are physically active, most children can have a healthy weight and should be happy with their bodies. Weight and body fat should be viewed as a health issue, not as a status symbol. Too often when speaking to body fat, we take it as a personal attack on our character.

Although it is impossible to keep all messages about the "ideal body" from reaching our children, we can adopt healthy lifestyle habits in the home, change how we ourselves think of body shape and size, and how we teach our children to view their bodies.

For more information on the American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines, visit healthychildren.org.

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