

PARENTS'

Information Guide



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Children’s health: An information guide on addressing health risks

This booklet gives you information about the major health risks facing our children and suggestions on how to address each of these risks.



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Introduction

A panel of leading scientists, convened by the Sports Science Institute of South Africa and Discovery Vitality, drew up a report card about the health and health risks of South Africa's children.

This report card places South African children at average to increased risk for future diseases, owing to lack of physical activity, unhealthy eating, smoking and obesity.

Measures from government and community organisations to address some of these risks have not always had the desired impact. Evidence suggests that unhealthy behaviours adopted by children become entrenched as they grow older. These behaviours become difficult, if not impossible, to change in adulthood. It is critical to increase children's knowledge and understanding of healthy behaviours from a young age. In addition, it is important to change unhealthy behaviour or habits as soon as possible.

To help children adopt healthy lifestyle habits, Discovery Vitality has wellness initiatives that promote children's wellness.



Introducing Vitality's wellness initiatives for children

Discovery Vitality has several initiatives to increase awareness of a healthy lifestyle in children.

These initiatives, directed at children and parents, aim to increase knowledge of healthy behaviours and recognise potential risks through health screenings and assessments. Discovery Vitality also has initiatives that focus on wellness at schools.

Health screenings and assessments:

- Vitality Child Health Assessment
- Kids Vitality Health Review
- A dental check-up

Addressing children's health risk factors

a Sedentary lifestyle choices

Activities that are considered sedentary include watching TV and playing video and computer games (screen time). Children engage in more of these types of activities than ever. These activities are taking over from free play and creative activity in children's list of activities. There is increasing evidence that this inactivity can be harmful to their physical and emotional wellbeing.

Recommendations to reduce sedentary activity

The challenge for parents is to include screen time in a healthy way in a range of play and learning activities. Here are some suggestions for screen time:

- Children younger than two should not watch TV
- TV and video games should not be used as a way of keeping a child occupied
- Set limits on screen time – weekends only or not more than two hours a day for preschoolers and an average of one to two hours a day for school-going children
- Other activities like homework, sport or playing a musical instrument should always be seen as more important than TV or electronic games
- Children should not have unrestricted access to a TV or games console in their bedrooms.

These are broad guidelines. Parents should make rules according to their circumstances. Bear in mind that a reduction in these sedentary activities is not always accompanied by an increase in physical activity. Increasing children's physical activity levels must be addressed along with reducing sedentary activity and screen time.

b Lack of physical activity

The dramatic decrease in physical activity in children over the last few decades has had a negative effect on children's health. A lack of physical activity can be directly or indirectly linked to many serious medical conditions.

Why physical activity is so important

Physical activity balances the amount of energy we take in from food with what we use. It also has a positive biological effect on complex metabolic processes (the body's normal chemical and physical changes), the healthy functioning of blood vessels and on mental health.

There are a few worrying trends when it comes to physical activity in children:

- Less than half of all children do enough physical activity
- Children become less active as they grow older. Physical activity declines most dramatically during adolescence. Because this behaviour continues into adulthood, inactive adolescents are likely to become inactive adults
- Girls are more inactive than boys. This continues into adolescence and contributes to the increasing number of adult females who have an unhealthy weight.

Addressing children's health risk factors

What form should physical activity take?

Children should do different forms of physical activity from normal daily activities to free play and sport to get health benefits.

Increasing activity in daily living

Daily activities includes:

- Taking the stairs instead of elevators and escalators
- Walking the dog
- Gardening
- Walking or cycling to school or the shops.

The list is endless. Children no longer do many of these activities and it is a good idea to get children back into these habits.

The benefits of play and sport

Free play

Children don't always get enough opportunities to play. Free play without an adult involved, either alone or with other children, indoors or outdoors, encourages initiative, imagination and independence. Children should be left to play by themselves in a safe environment for at least one hour a day.

Organised play

Structured or organised play can develop social skills like empathy, understanding, sharing and working together. Ideally, the adult supervising the play should remain a play companion and be receptive and flexible to suggestions the children make. Vary the play to promote gross motor skills (walking, running and jumping), fine motor skills (drawing and knitting), cognitive skills (reasoning and problem solving) and creative skills.

Organised sport

Sport helps children develop:

- Fitness, cardio-respiratory fitness, skill and coordination
- Social skills like sharing, taking turns and working as a team
- Goal setting, time management and coping with pressure
- Self-esteem.

Sport specialisation is not ideal for children younger than 12. They should play a range of team sports that test different skills and allow for social interaction. Children will soon discover the sport they are best at or enjoy the most.

Children aged two to six years

Parents should provide a safe, nurturing and minimally structured play environment. Toddlers and preschoolers should also be allowed to develop enjoyment of outdoor physical activity and unstructured exploration under the supervision of a responsible, adult caregiver. The emphasis at this age is on fun, exploration and experimentation. Instruction should be limited to a show-and-tell format. Appropriate play activities include running, swimming, tumbling, and throwing and catching.



Children aged six to nine years

At these ages, children improve their motor skills, visual tracking and balance. Parents should continue to promote free play involving more sophisticated movement patterns with emphasis on basic skill development.

Children should be encouraged to participate in a range of organised sports (for example soccer and cricket), but they should have flexible rules and short instruction times. The focus should be on participation and enjoyment rather than competition and winning.

At this age, parents can start creating a culture of active living by encouraging walking and taking the stairs instead of lifts and escalators.

Children aged 10 to 12 years

Physical activities that focus on enjoyment should be encouraged. Better processing of verbal instructions and the ability to understand information allow for more competitive participation in sport in this age group.

Consider placing children in teams based on physical maturity rather than age. This reduces the risk of injury, particularly in contact sports. It also increases the chances of success for children who are at the earlier stages of development. You may introduce strength training, using elastic bands or small weights. Strength training programmes should be supervised and proper technique should be taught.

Adolescents

Physical activity often drops significantly in adolescence. Identifying activities that are fun and include friends is crucial for ensuring long-term participation. Adolescents tend to find competitive and non-competitive sports and fitness activities like dancing and skateboarding appealing. Walking, cycling and doing household chores should also be encouraged.

Weight training may continue as an adolescent reaches full physical maturity. Longer sets using heavier weights and fewer repetitions may be done safely, while continuing to emphasise the importance of proper technique.

How much physical activity is enough?

The Centre for Disease Control and the American Association of Paediatrics recommend that children and adolescents should do 60 minutes to several hours of physical activity each day. Teenagers should do at least 20 minutes of high-intensity activity on three days a week and 30 minutes of moderate activity on preferably every day of the week.



Nutrition and healthy eating

There have been many changes in children's eating habits in the last few decades. These include:

- The increase in the availability of relatively cheap high-energy fast foods
- The significant increase in portion sizes
- The increase in the availability of high-energy packet snacks and sweetened soft drinks. These items are available in vending machines, school tuckshops, 24 hour convenience stores and supermarkets
- Fewer meals being eaten at home because working parents are unable to find the time or energy to cook nutritious meals.

The advertising of food products and popular misconceptions about eating habits make it difficult for parents and children to make healthier food choices.

To counter these trends, it is important to teach children about healthy nutrition and healthier food choices.

Children's eating behaviours, body image and growth

Parents' task is to set times for meals and to offer a selection of nutritious food. Children's task is to choose from the foods offered and to decide how much to eat. Parents who bribe or force children to eat more than they need put their children at risk for obesity. It is not a good idea to give children an alternative if they regularly refuse foods that are offered – this can lead to fussiness.

Addressing children's health risk factors

There is a common myth that chubbiness in babies and children is healthier than thinness. Being overweight often continues from childhood to adulthood – overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults.

Overweight children are predisposed to related diseases of lifestyle such as hypertension (high blood pressure), high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes from a much younger age.

Children's food preferences

Taste for most foods is acquired. Babies who eat sweet or salty foods at a young age develop a fondness for these tastes. It is advisable to reduce exposure to these tastes at an early age because it is difficult to undo these preferences in later life. Early and regular exposure to vegetables and fruit may create a lifelong liking for these foods.

Recommendations for a healthy diet from a young age

- Enjoy a variety of foods. Many South African children eat an unvaried and repetitive diet. In general, children have an unhealthy dependence on meat, chips and sugary drinks. To get all the essential nutrients for growth and development, include foods from all the major food groups. Particular emphasis should be placed on vegetables and fruit, whole grains, low-fat and non-fat dairy products, beans, fish and lean meat. Eating food that contains saturated and trans-fat, cholesterol and added sugar and salt should be greatly reduced.
- Vegetables and fruit should preferably be eaten with every meal. About five servings of vegetables and fruit are advised daily but the amount can vary according to age. Select from all five vegetable subgroups (dark green, orange, legumes, starchy vegetables and other vegetables) several times a week. Eating vegetables and fruit protects against cardiovascular disease and certain cancers.
- Choose wholegrain bread rather than refined bread and cook with wholegrain cereals such as brown rice, rather than refined cereals such as white rice and pap. Food rich in grain lowers the risk for several chronic diseases such as being overweight, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer and gastro-intestinal diseases.
- Eat more oily fish such as salmon, mackerel and tuna. Fish is an important source of protein and oily fish is high in omega-3 fatty acids, which protect against heart disease.
- Children two to eight years old should have two cups of fat-free or low-fat milk or equivalent milk products such as yoghurt a day. Children aged nine and older should have three cups a day of fat-free or low-fat milk or equivalent milk products. Milk is an important source of protein and calcium for bone strength.
- Choose and prepare foods with little salt. Salt plays a role in causing and worsening high blood pressure. The taste for salt is acquired and can be reduced after a period of reduced salt intake.
- Reduce the amount of red meat (mince, steak and burgers), which is high in saturated fats. Offer lean cuts, skinless poultry, fish and soy products instead.
- Use soft margarine and vegetable oils like canola, soybean, safflower and olive oil (high in poly- and mono-unsaturated fats) instead of butter and brick margarine (high in saturated and trans-fats).
- Reduce the amount of sugary drinks (cool drinks) that your children drink. Restrict your children to about one three-quarter glass (170 ml) of juice a day. Drinks containing a high concentration of sugar have few other nutrients and are seen as a major cause of childhood obesity. Sugary drinks also cause tooth decay. Children should rather drink water or non- or low-fat milk.
- Reduce food containing 'empty calories' like fried chips, cakes and chocolates. These foods are also high in trans-fats which are harmful to the cardiovascular system.

Some suggestions for healthier eating habits in children

- Make sure that your children have a healthy breakfast every day. Breakfast improves attentiveness and the ability to process information at school.
- Pack lunch and nutritious snacks instead of giving money for the tuckshop.
- Serve portions appropriate for your children's size and age.
- Allow your children to self-regulate how much they eat.
- Discourage eating and snacking in front of the TV.
- Teach your children about food and nutrition when shopping and cooking.
- Encourage eating together and adopting healthy eating habits as a family.

Food and eating are vital for children's growth and development and to learn good social skills. Keep this in mind when promoting healthy eating habits.

d Children being overweight

Medical literature talks of a 'global obesity epidemic' among children. The Healthy Active Kids Report Card, developed by the Sports Science Institute of South Africa in conjunction with Discovery Vitality, shows more than 30% of teenage girls and nearly 10% of boys are overweight in South Africa.

What's causing it?

The increase in sedentary activity, a drop in physical activity and changes in eating patterns are the major factors that are contributing to weight gain in children.

Consequences of childhood obesity

Many chronic diseases of lifestyle such as hypertension (high blood pressure), diabetes and high cholesterol are presenting at a much earlier age than ever before. Type 2 diabetes, which was previously called adult onset diabetes, is now the leading form of diabetes in adolescents. These chronic diseases of lifestyle can lead to an increase in serious complications such as a heart attack or stroke.

Complications of obesity in children

- High blood pressure
- Type 2 diabetes
- High cholesterol
- Liver disease
- Gall stones
- Orthopaedic problems – especially hip and lower back
- Skin diseases such as fungal infections
- Cystic disease of the ovaries
- Problems with sleep due to obstruction of the airway
- Social isolation and behavioural problems.

Diagnosing obesity

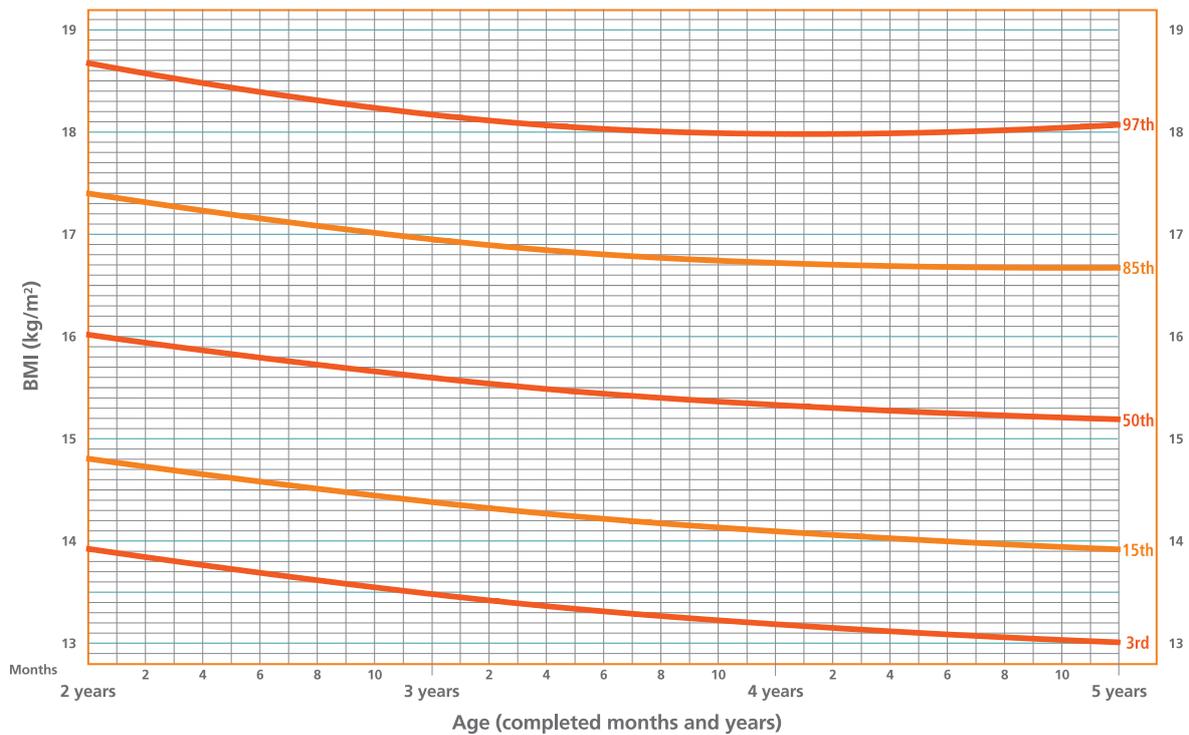
Children who are overweight are conventionally diagnosed by their body mass index (body mass in kilograms divided by height in metres squared – kg/m^2) on a body mass index percentile chart. A body mass index above the 85th percentile for children's ages is considered overweight and above the 95th percentile is considered obese in children and adolescents.



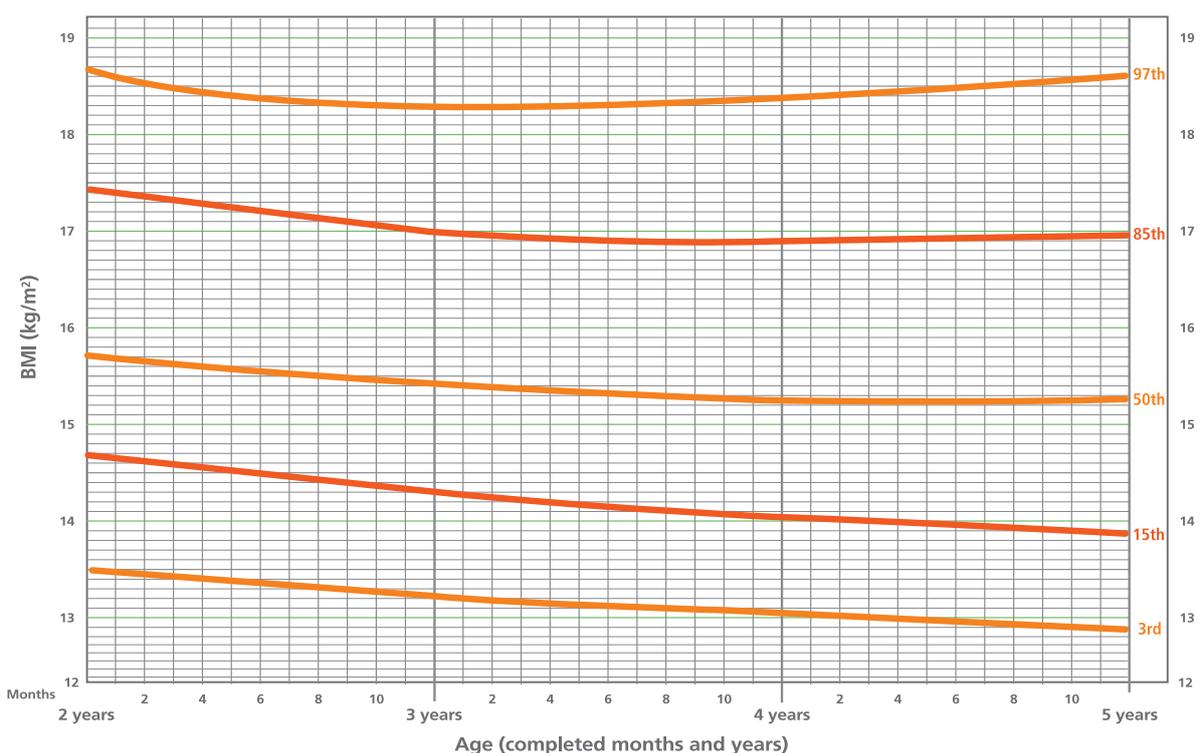
Addressing children's health risk factors

BMI – Body mass index charts

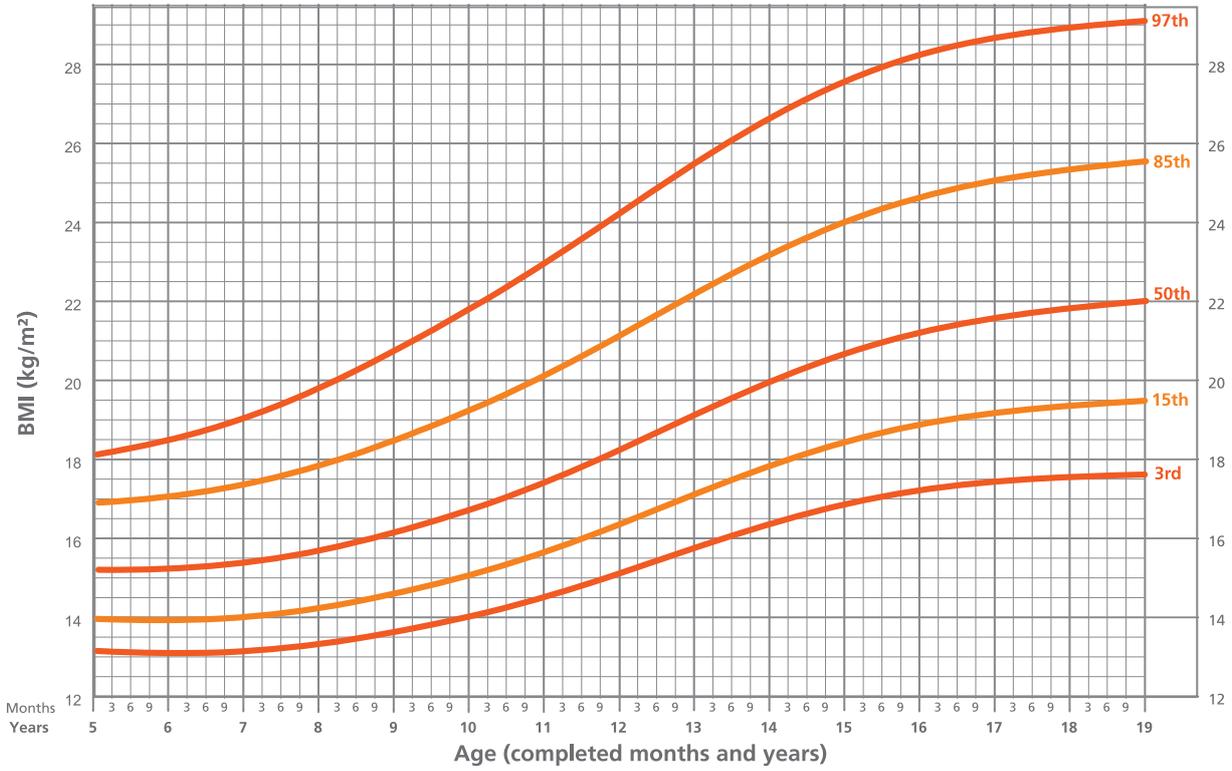
Body mass index chart for boys aged two to five



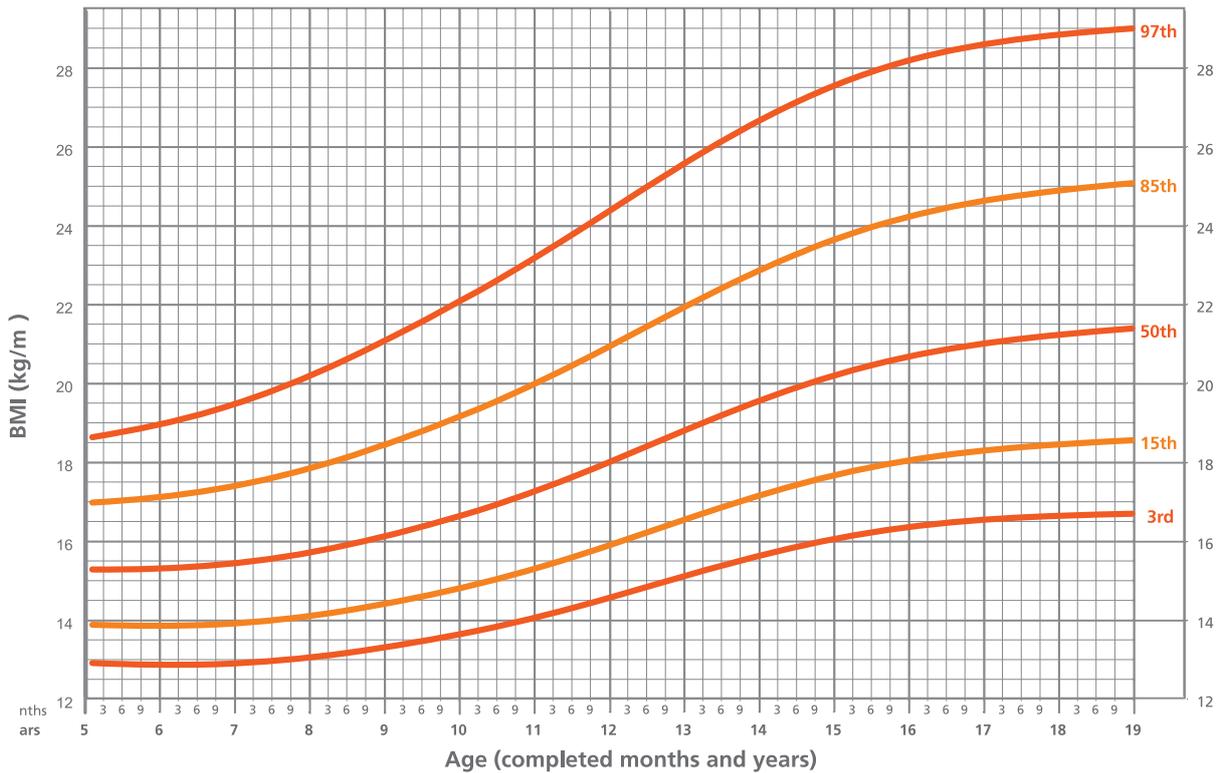
Body mass index chart for girls aged two to five



Body mass index chart for boys aged two to five



Body mass index chart for girls aged two to five



Addressing children's health risk factors

d General lifestyle risk factors

Lack of sleep

Parents often ask how much sleep children should get? This is a difficult question to answer. Sleep needs may vary from child to child and according to their age. The following table is a rough guide of how many hours a day children need to sleep

Age of child	Total sleep each day
Three to 12 months	14 to 15 hours
One to three years	12 to 14 hours
Three to five years	11 to 13 hours
Six to 12 years	10 to 11 hours
12 to 18 years	8.5 to 9.5 hours

Sleep problems affect about 25% to 40% of children and adolescents. The effects of sleep problems are not restricted to night time. Many sleep disorders have an effect on mood, behaviour, learning and growth.

Not getting enough sleep and poor quality sleep (frequent waking and night terrors) can cause children to be overweight. Sleep problems such as sleep apnoea are common complications of children being overweight. Children with this condition experience closure of the upper airway during sleep, so they snore and wake often during the night.

It is important to establish and enforce regular sleep times for children to develop healthy sleep patterns

Sun care

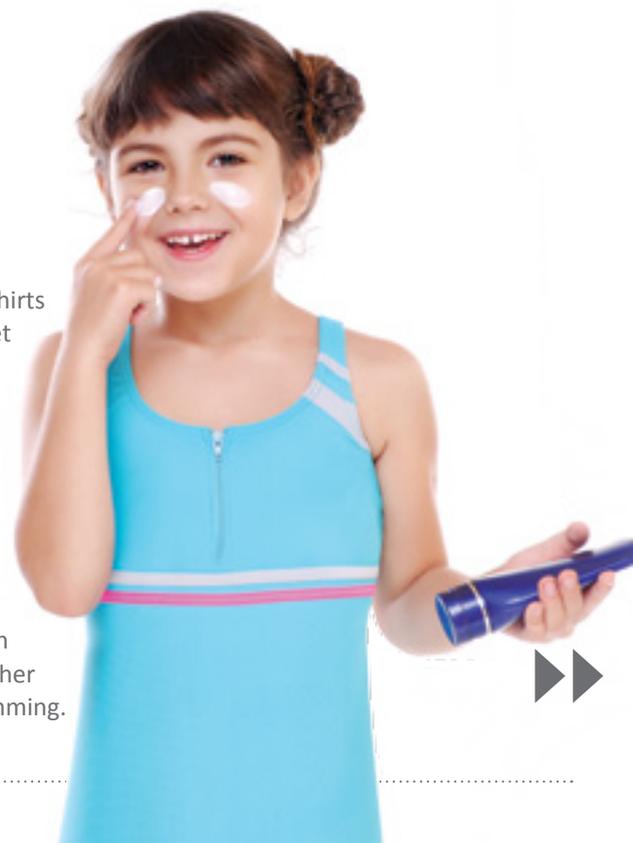
The most common skin injury, caused by too much sun exposure, is sunburn. Sunburn causes reddening and inflammation of the skin. Repeated exposure to ultraviolet rays causes subtle damage to the skin, which adds up over time. This damage is less obvious than sunburn but more harmful. It leads to premature ageing, reduces the skin's normal ability to protect itself against and recover from damage and, eventually, to skin cancer.

Sun protection

All children should be protected against the sun. Children with fairer complexions, who have less protective melanin, should be especially protected from a young age.

Tips to protect children against sunburn

- Avoid the midday sun. Children should not play in the open from 10:00 to 14:00 when UV rays are most intense.
- Children should wear sun-protective clothing such as long-sleeved shirts and pants made from a tightly woven, lightweight fabric. Change wet clothes because they are more transparent to UV rays than dry clothes. A wide-brimmed hat adds extra protection for the nose, ears, throat and neck.
- A pair of UV protected sunglasses, preferably in a wraparound style, should be worn outdoors in daylight hours. Tinted glasses that do not screen UV light are not sun protective.
- A broad-spectrum sunscreen with a sun protective factor (SPF) of at least 15 should be worn every day (even on cloudy days) to prevent skin damage from UV rays that gradually adds up. Sunscreen should be applied at least an hour before going out in the sun. A higher strength sunscreen is recommended when playing outdoors or swimming.



Vitality's wellness initiatives for children

Understanding your children's health risks and status is the first step to improving them. Discovery Vitality offers great incentives when certain children's wellness assessments are done.

a Kids Vitality Health Review

This questionnaire is an assessment of your children's health status and will give you valuable insight into your children's health. You will get feedback on how to address your children's main risk factors. Your family will earn 2 000 Vitality points for each child on your Discovery Vitality policy. You can do this assessment on www.discovery.co.za

b Vitality Child Health Assessment

This assessment is done at a GP in the Discovery GP network. It is a medical assessment to help detect and manage health risks related to lifestyle and behaviour in children and adolescents. The family doctor is best placed to do the assessment. To assist you, we have prepared a [template of questions and guidelines](#) you can use to assess lifestyle-related risks and identify overweight and obese children.

While the assessment should focus on lifestyle-related issues, it should not be restricted to these issues. We encourage you to address other health problems in children when they arise. Your family will earn 2 500 Vitality points.

c Dental check-up

Taking your children for a dental check-up will earn your family 2 000 Vitality points for each child on your Discovery Vitality policy.



Your easy-to-remember wellness tips for children

Take the countdown to a healthier lifestyle:

- Have five servings of vegetables and fruit every day
- Remember the four pillars of sun care:
 - Seek shade between 10:00 and 14:00
 - Use sunscreen with an SPF 15 and more
 - Wear a wide-brimmed sun hat
 - Get sunglasses with UV protection
- Have three servings of dairy every day
- Get less than two hours of screen time a day
- Do at least one hour of physical activity a day
- Don't smoke
- GO!

Implement these wellness tips and your children will be on the path to healthier lifestyles!



Lunchbox planner

Stick this planner on your fridge to make healthy lunches for your children.

Carbohydrate (unrefined, whole grain)	Bread: Whole-wheat, rye, seed, low GI	Roll: Whole-wheat, seed	Pita: Whole-wheat mini pita bread	Crackers: Whole-wheat, Provita, Ryvita	Mielie-on-the-cob / baby corn spears	Air popped popcorn (lightly salted if at all)	Baby potatoes				
Protein (meat, egg, dairy or legume)	Boiled egg	Sliced lean ham	Sliced lean roast beef	Sliced chicken breast or drumstick	Canned tuna or salmon (in brine)	Extra lean biltong, for example ostrich	Low fat yoghurt (can be frozen)	Low fat cottage cheese (smooth or chunky) – plain or flavoured for dips	Baked beans	Low fat flavoured milk	Low fat cheese, for example mozzarella – wedge, slices or grated
Fat	Low fat mayonnaise	Peanuts	Peanut butter	Olives	Olive oil	Salad dressing (olive oil and balsamic vinegar)	Soft polyunsaturated margarine or butter				
Fruit	Fresh fruit: • Banana • Apple • Pear	• Apricots • Peach • Pineapple	• Mango • Cherries • Litchis	• Figs • Sliced kiwi fruit • Melon balls	• Pawpaw • Grapes • Mixed fruit salad	Dried fruit: Raisins or dried apple	Dried mango or dried pear	Prunes or dried peaches	Dried apricots or dried fig	Fruit juice: 100% fruit juice (diluted with water)	Fruit bars: 100% fruit bars, for example TruFruco
Vegetable	Fresh vegetables: Carrot sticks and celery fingers	Mushroom chunks	Mixed salad	Baby tomatoes Shredded cabbage or lettuce	Gherkins	Cauliflower	Cucumber sticks	Red, green and yellow pepper strips	Asparagus spears	Vegetable juice: Tomato juice or mixed vegetable juice, for example V8	Vegetable soup (chunky, not instant powdered soup)

Examples

Menu 1	Menu 2	Menu 3	Menu 4	Menu 5
				
Carbohydrate Whole-wheat bread (2 slices)	Carbohydrate Seeded roll	Carbohydrate Whole-wheat mini pita bread	Carbohydrate Seed loaf	Carbohydrate Baby potatoes
Protein Sliced lean ham	Protein Low fat cheese	Protein Canned tuna or salmon (in brine)	Protein Low fat yoghurt	Protein Sliced chicken breast or drumstick
Fat Soft polyunsaturated margarine or butter or low fat mayonnaise	Fat Soft polyunsaturated margarine or butter	Fat Low fat mayonnaise	Fat Peanut butter	Fat Low fat mayonnaise
Fruit Banana	Fruit Dried pear	Fruit Fruit juice: 100% fruit juice, for example Ceres and Liqui-Fruit (diluted with water)	Fruit Mixed fruit salad	Fruit Apple
Vegetable Lettuce and cucumber	Vegetable Tomato	Vegetable Lettuce, tomato and cucumber		Vegetable Red, green and yellow pepper strips OR mixed salad

About the author



Dr. Deepak Patel



Dr Deepak Patel is a clinical specialist at Discovery Vitality. He is a paediatrician with a special interest in paediatric and adolescent sports medicine. He previously worked as a consultant paediatrician at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital and had a private practice in Johannesburg.



Discovery Vitality | 155 West Street | Sandton | 0860 109 939 | www.vitalityschools.co.za | vitalityschools@discovery.co.za