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# Weighty

**The frightening reasons teens are supersizing themselves in record numbers.**

BY KATIE ABBONDANZA

The numbers are staggering: Right now, one in three kids in the United States is overweight or obese. And extra weight doesn't just mean going up a jean size. Being clinically overweight or obese in your teenage years has major consequences in the long run, such as heart problems, diabetes or cancer. Keep reading to find out the real reasons why teens are packing on the pounds at an alarming rate—and what you can do about it.

## **Huge Truth #1: We rely on the wrong food.**

"Sometimes I eat junk food to avoid stress, anxiety, homework and overall difficult situations," says Mikaela J., 13. "If it's around my house, I might as well eat it."

Mikaela's not the only one. A recent article in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* reported that super-sweet soda, greasy pizza and sugary baked goods are the top three calorie sources for kids. Combined, these foods add up to a whopping 40 percent of calories consumed each and every day.

"I usually go for chips or ice cream or cake," Jocelyn D., 17, says. "After about 30 minutes to an hour, I feel bad." While unhealthy foods may be convenient, they often lack protein and fiber, which keep you full. The crash-and-burn effect is commonly associated with sugary foods and caffeine. They lift you up for a minute and then drop you, hard. You're left searching for another fix—and soon, you've got another handful of chips.

**TAKE ACTION:** "A lot of eating is purely impulse," says certified wellness coach Jackie Keller. So when you find yourself reaching for a quick bite, take a minute to stop and think. It even helps to sip a glass of water while you consider what you'll chow on next. If you're hungry after the water, try fruit. Still wanna snack? Eat a half portion of the not-so-great-for-you grub.



# matters

## Huge Truth #2: We eat too much.

Fast food and other meals eaten away from the kitchen table also contribute to our chunky country in a major way. With restaurant portions often doubling or even tripling the amount of food you'd typically serve yourself, the USDA estimates that you add up to 108 extra calories to your daily intake for every meal eaten outside the house. Combine oversized portions at restaurants with less-than-healthy eats from the school caf and it's no wonder teens are having trouble staying fit.

**TAKE ACTION:** Jackie stresses that teens need to look at portions with a critical eye. "When someone puts a plate of food down in front of you at a restaurant or family gathering, ask yourself if it's what you should be eating or two or three times more. Chances are, it's more," says Jackie. She suggests asking the waiter to box up half for you to take home for later.

## Huge Truth #3: We don't diet right.

While watching the amount of food you fill your plate with is key, it's just as important not to deprive yourself, either. Many teens fall into typical diet traps, like starving all day only to binge on bad-for-you foods later.

"Your metabolism will slow down if you starve now to eat later," Jackie says. "You'll also be much hungrier than you would have been if you balanced out your day with healthy meals and ate a good breakfast. You'd eat fewer calories overall, and be much less likely to overdo it on the wrong foods."

Mikaela knows the downfalls of diets well. "It makes me gain weight and feel sick all the time," she tells us. "I even tried starving myself, and that is the worst. You feel like you don't want to do anything with your friends anymore, that food's the enemy, and you get really sad and grumpy."

**TAKE ACTION:** The healthy alternative to crash diets? Grazing on healthy snacks throughout the day. Of course, it's critical to eat a balanced breakfast, lunch and dinner, too. But you can avoid overeating at mealtimes by keeping your stomach satisfied—and your metabolism speedy—by munching on small servings of fruits, veggies, almonds and yogurt when hunger strikes.

## Huge Truth #4: We drink too many calories.

It's not just what we're munching on that makes us so unhealthy. Drinks are just as dangerous, especially the sodas and other sugary sips we reach for to wash down a burger or get a mini jolt of energy. In fact, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published research showing almost 10 per-

cent of kids' calories come from sweetened drinks, including soda, corn syrup-laden juices, smoothies and sports drinks.

A recent study published in the health journal *Pediatrics* found that 50 percent of girls drink one sugary beverage every day, which sounds innocent enough, but it adds up. Check this out: An 8-ounce serving of Arizona Kiwi Strawberry juice has 28 grams of sugar, which boils down to 6 teaspoons of the white stuff. What's scarier is that fountain sodas and canned juices are more likely to come in 21-ounce bottles, which means they contain almost three times as much sugar. It's no surprise, then, that most teens consume 34 teaspoons of sugar daily. Gulp.

**TAKE ACTION:** Save the soda for special occasions. When it comes to your daily drink, reach for water. Want a change of pace? Brew a cup of tea, drink seltzer water or add fruits, herbs or cucumbers to your chilled water. It's also good to get calcium, so opt for skim milk whenever you can.

## Huge Truth #5: We're not sleeping.

Another reason we're struggling to stay healthy? Sleep—or lack thereof. The journal *Sleep* recently published a study that found teens who got less than eight hours—a whopping 85 percent of those polled—were more likely to nosh on fatty snacks and foods.

"Adolescents who sleep less are more likely to pile on pounds," says Dr. Joanna Dolgoff, adolescent obesity specialist and author of *Red Light, Green Light, Eat Right*. The

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## WHY WEIGHT IS YOUR #1 HEALTH RISK

Sure, snacking here and there won't hurt ya. But consistently eating poorly and mistreating your bod can come back to haunt ya. "Seventy-five percent of teens who are overweight or obese will become obese adults," Dr. Joanna Dolgoff says. Plus, health problems that used to occur primarily in adults (like Type 2 diabetes) are becoming more widespread in teens. "If an adult gets Type 2 diabetes, we would expect them to suffer the consequences in their 70s," she explains. "Now, you have those medical problems earlier. We expect to see more heart attacks and strokes in younger adults."

Worried about your weight? First, talk to your doctor to see if the number on your scale is normal. Or head to Dr. Dolgoff's website ([DrDolgoff.com](http://DrDolgoff.com)), where you can check out your Body Mass Index percentile, which is formulated specifically for teens and kids. If the number shows you are overweight, talk to your doc—BMI calculations aren't always perfect, but your doctor can figure out the best course of action for you.

