



Public Health
England

Protecting and improving the nation's health

Consistent messaging to promote a healthier weight

Core messages to support health and care professionals to deliver brief conversations

School age – five to eighteen years

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Why is healthier weight important?

What happens before, during and after pregnancy through to adolescence impacts on physical and emotional health all the way through to adulthood 1.

Research shows that children who stay a healthy weight and lead a healthy lifestyle tend to be fitter, healthier, have better attendance in school, and, be more self-confident 2.

They're also much less likely to have health problems in later life 2.

Obesity harms children and young people

The infographic is divided into four columns, each with an icon and text below it:

- Emotional and behavioural:** Icon of a head with a target symbol. Below the icon is a horizontal line, followed by the text "Emotional and behavioural". A second horizontal line is below this text, followed by a bulleted list: "• Stigmatisation", "• bullying", and "• low self-esteem".
- School absence:** Icon of a school building with the word "SCHOOL" on top. Below the icon is a horizontal line, followed by the text "School absence".
- Physical health issues:** Icon of a person's torso showing internal organs (heart, lungs, liver, stomach) and a stethoscope. Below the icon is a horizontal line, followed by a bulleted list: "• High cholesterol", "• high blood pressure", "• pre-diabetes", "• bone & joint problems", and "• breathing difficulties".
- Increased risk of becoming overweight adults:** Icon of two stylized human figures, one smaller (child) and one larger (adult). Below the icon is a horizontal line, followed by the text "Increased risk of becoming overweight adults". A second horizontal line is below this text, followed by the text "Risk of ill-health and premature mortality in adult life".

2.

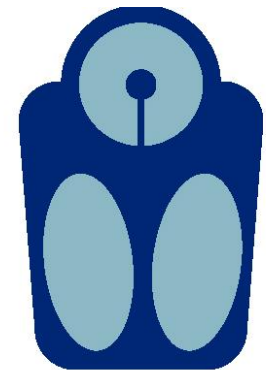
What factors influence healthy weight management?

Diet and physical activity

Causes of obesity are multi-factorial, including biological; physiological; psycho-social; behavioural; and environmental factors.

Obesity is generally caused by consuming more calories –particularly those in fatty and sugary foods – than you burn off through physical activity. The excess energy is stored by the body as fat. Consumption of free sugars is a risk factor both for obesity and dental caries. Tooth decay is caused by increased consumption and frequency of eating foods with high levels of sugar. Poor dental health impacts on children and families' wellbeing ³. Tooth extraction was the most common reason for hospital admission for children aged 5 to 9 years old ⁴.

Physical activity for children is critical for motor development, cognitive improvement, psychosocial health, and cardio-metabolic health; reduces body fat and can increase academic achievement. Less than half of children and young people aged 5-16 (46.8%) met the UK Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines of doing an average of at least 60 minutes per day across the week in 2018/19 ⁵.

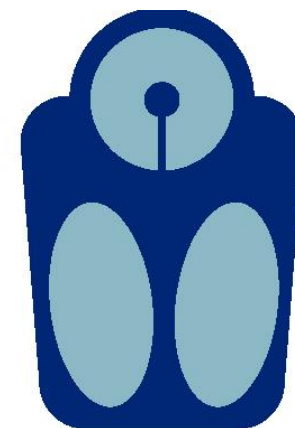


Smoking

Most smokers start as teenagers: two-thirds before the age of 18. The reasons they start are complex, ranging from peer pressure to behavioural problems 6.

Breathing in secondhand smoke is particularly harmful for children. Smoking can trigger asthma attacks in children who already have the condition, serious respiratory conditions such as bronchitis and pneumonia - younger children are also much more likely to be admitted to hospital for a serious respiratory infection, meningitis, coughs and colds, a middle ear infection, which can cause hearing loss.

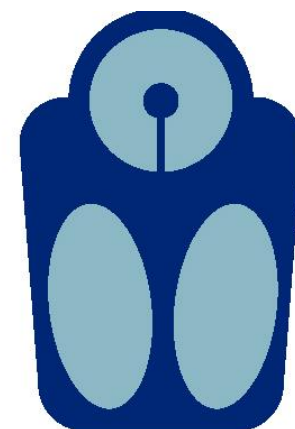
Research suggests that some people may gain weight when they stop smoking. Some of the reasons for this include; smoking can suppress an individual's appetite and food may taste better after they stop smoking. It's possible to mistake nicotine cravings for feeling hungry, or to eat to distract away from the cravings. Eating a healthier diet and increasing physical activity can help minimise weight gain 7.



Alcohol consumption

England has been identified as having one of the highest rates of regular drinking and drunkenness among young people in Europe. Concern has been raised about increasing levels of consumption within the 11 to 13 age group and among adolescent girls ⁸. Alcohol misuse impacts not just on the drinker but also those around them. Children affected by parental alcohol misuse are more likely to have physical, psychological and behavioural problems. Alcohol impairs ability to parent and respond to emergencies ⁹.

Alcohol is also high in calories and can contribute to weight gain. Regularly drinking, more than the Chief Medical Officers' low risk guidelines can have a noticeable impact on an individual's waistline as well as cause less obvious but more serious health problems ⁹.



Mental health



Obesity can be associated with poor psychological and emotional health, and poor sleep¹⁰. The relationship between obesity and common mental health disorders is complex. There are bi-directional associations between mental health problems and obesity, with levels of obesity, gender, age and socioeconomic status being key risk factors ^{11,12}. Children of affected mothers and fathers are at higher risk of poor mental health, physical health, social and educational outcomes.

Protecting the health of children and young people is vital. Half of all mental health problems have been established by the age of 14, rising to 75% by age 24. One in ten children age 5 to 16 years have a diagnosable problem such as conduct disorder (6%), anxiety disorder (3%), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (2%) or depression (2%). Children from low income families are at highest risk ¹³. One in five 15-year-olds in England reported having ever self-harmed with girls being three times more likely than boys to report self-harming ¹⁴. Positive mental wellbeing is essential if children and young people are to flourish and lead rich and fulfilling lives.

Skills to deliver brief interventions

Skills for healthy weight conversations

What can I do in my role?

As a health and care professional, you are in a unique position to raise awareness and motivate children, young people and families. Making Every Contact Count (MECC) enables the opportunistic delivery of consistent and concise healthy lifestyle information and enables individuals to engage in conversations about their health [15](#).

By utilising your skills to deliver brief healthy weight conversations through MECC you can help to inform, engage and support children, young people and their families to make healthier choices which could significantly reduce the risk of ill-health [15](#).

MECC is an approach to behaviour change that uses day-to-day interactions to support individuals in making positive changes to their physical and mental health and wellbeing. It provides an opportunity to actively engage individuals in a brief intervention that will support positive change. This can help an individual in increasing their psychological capability for behaviour change e.g. by helping raise awareness of their risk factors for activity such as smoking, whilst also contributing to their motivation to take action [15](#).

Skills for healthy weight conversations

There is a 3 step framework at the core of delivering brief intervention. The three steps are **Ask, Advise & Assist** ¹⁵.

1. **ASK** – Be alert to opportunities to raise the issue sensitively and listen for any verbal cues e.g. “how would you feel about discussing your weight?”
2. **ADVISE** – Listen for verbal cues and try to reflect on things that have been mentioned/are important for the individual. Adopt a positive approach that conveys belief in the individual when speaking about improving their lifestyle. Provide information if relevant. *
3. **ASSIST** – Supporting the person to take the first steps, to feel in control of their choices e.g. by providing information and signposting to support services.

If the individual isn't interested at this time – leave the door open to support them to make positive lifestyle changes in future e.g. *"I understand that this can be difficult to talk about. If this is something you want to talk about in the future", I'm here to help and keen to support the family.*" or *signpost to where they can access help in the future*

Training and support available

A brief intervention can support and empower people to make change; helping raise an individual's awareness of their risk factors, while contributing to their motivation to take action.

- The **'Let's Talk About Weight' tools** provides a step by step guide to conversations on weight management, offering practical tips and guidance on raising the issue of weight, referral considerations, making the offer of referral and following up with patients <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-weight-management-short-conversations-with-patients> ^{16,17}
- The **Childhood Obesity Animation** demonstrates for all health and care professionals their vital role in supporting children, young people and families in maintaining a healthy lifestyle to prevent and reduce childhood obesity <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQK4vj1Lzlg> ¹⁸
- There are a suite of **MECC practical resources** to support training and implementation of MECC <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/making-every-contact-count-mecc-practical-resources> ¹⁵
- The MECC website includes links to **e-learning, guidance, shared learning and practice examples** and a national MECC community of practice <http://www.makingeverycontactcount.co.uk/> ¹⁵

Training and support available

E-Learning for healthcare modules available <https://www.e-lfh.org.uk/>;

Healthy child (pregnancy – age 5)

- Nutrition before and during pregnancy
- Infant feeding
- Healthy eating for toddlers 1 -4 years
- Weighing and measuring infants and children
- Growth charts and their interpretation
- Feeding children with development difficulties
- Obese toddlers and infants
- Obesity prevention in children

Healthy school child (school age children)

- Growth and nutrition
- Understanding and tackling obesity

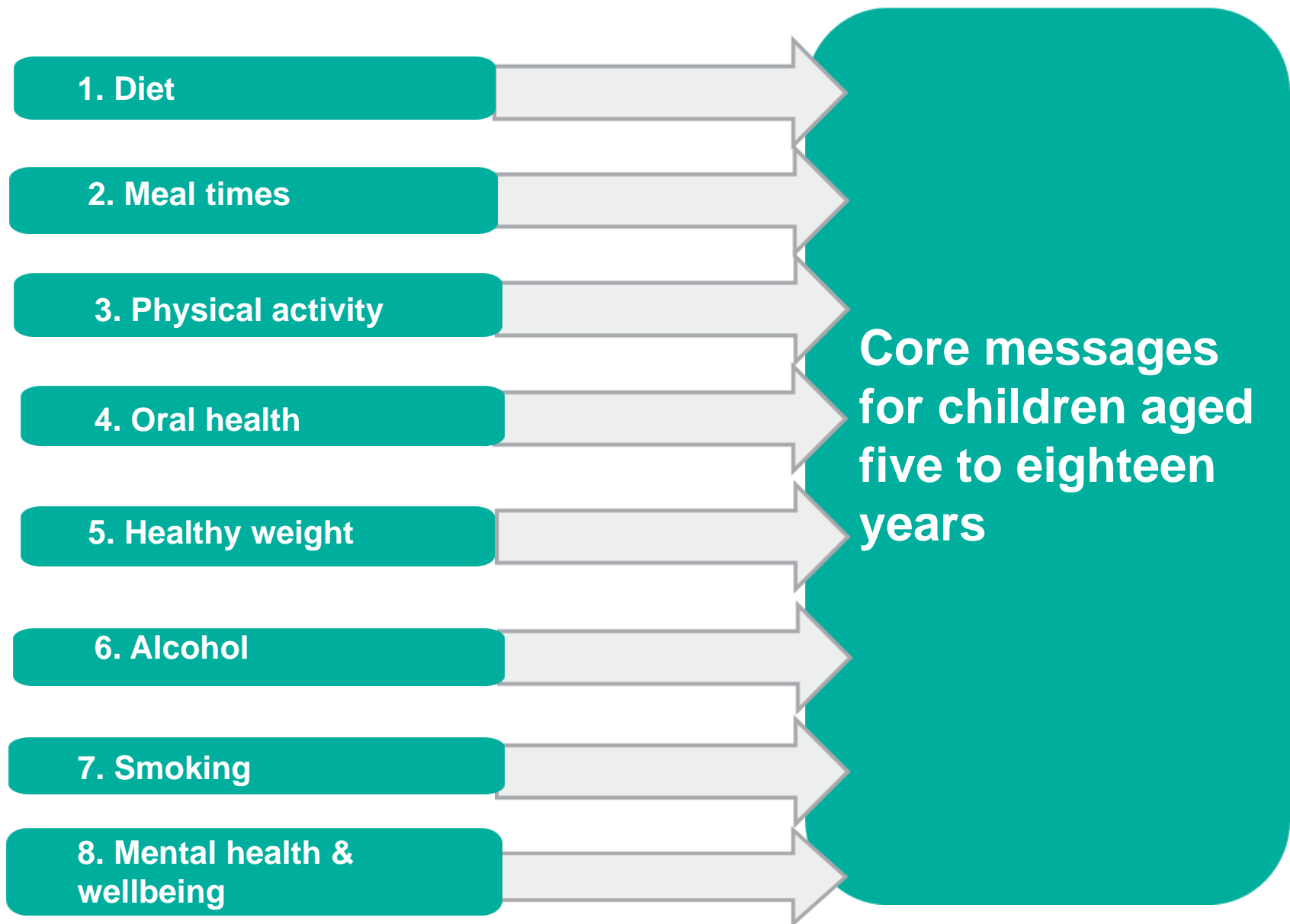
Adolescent health

- Development of normal eating behaviour
- Body shape and body image in adolescence
- Obesity in young people
- Public health and community management of adolescent obesity
- Medical assessment and management of obesity

General E- learning modules

- Introduction to obesity
- Identifying unhealthy weight and risk factors for weight gain
- Managing obesity: supporting behaviour change
- Guiding and enabling behaviour change

Core messages for children aged five to eighteen years





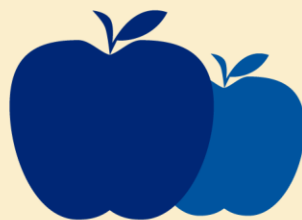
Core messages to promote a healthier weight for school age children

Why is a healthier weight important?

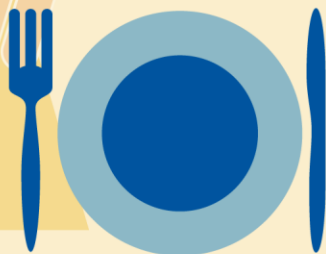
Research shows that children who stay a healthy weight and lead a healthy lifestyle tend to be fitter, healthier, have better attendance in school, and, be more self-confident. They are also much less likely to have weight-related health problems in later life.



Encourage families to **prepare healthy meals at home**. Recommend reading food labels, using healthier ingredients, and controlling how much sugar, fat and salt is used.



Promote the Eatwell Guide to support individuals to get the **healthy balanced diet**. Eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables daily. Foods and drinks high in fat, salt or sugar should be consumed infrequently and in small amounts.



Ensure **portion sizes** are appropriate. When buying package snacks promote snacks with no more than 100 kcals, and two a day maximum.



For those children above the 91st BMI centile, offer to make a referral to a **local weight management service**.



Children and young people (5-18 years) should engage in **at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous intensity activity per day** averaged across the week. They should do a variety of activities across the week to develop movement, fitness and strength. They should minimise long periods of not moving.



Children, young people and their parents/carers should be made aware that drinking alcohol, even at age 15 or older, can be hazardous to health. An **alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option**.



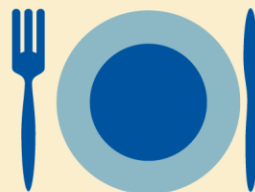
Core messages to promote a healthier weight for parents and carers

How can parents/ carers support children and young people to achieve a healthier weight?

One of the most powerful ways to encourage children and young people to eat a healthy balanced diet and be active is to advise parents/carers to lead by example and be positive role models. Any changes to a child's diet and lifestyle are much more likely to be accepted if they involve the whole family.



Eat healthier - Promote the Eatwell Guide. Foods and drinks high in fat, salt or sugars should be eaten infrequently.



Healthier weight - Individuals with excess weight or who are at particular risk of obesity can be supported by a health and care professional. Offer to make a referral to a local weight management service.



Be active - Undertake **strengthening activities** in major muscle groups on at least **two days a week**. Accumulate at least **150 minutes moderate intensity**, 75 minutes vigorous intensity activity, shorter amounts vigorous intensity activity or a combination each week. Minimise long periods of inactivity.



Oral health - Women are entitled to free NHS dental treatment during pregnancy and before the baby is one year old. NHS dental treatment is free for individuals 18 or under 19 years and in qualifying full-time education.

Mental health - Encourage parents and carers to be aware of their emotional wellbeing, knowing when they should seek help and have support systems in place can help prevent issues becoming more serious.



Sleep - Advise individuals about sleep hygiene (including having a healthy bedtime routine, avoiding caffeine and reducing activity before sleep).

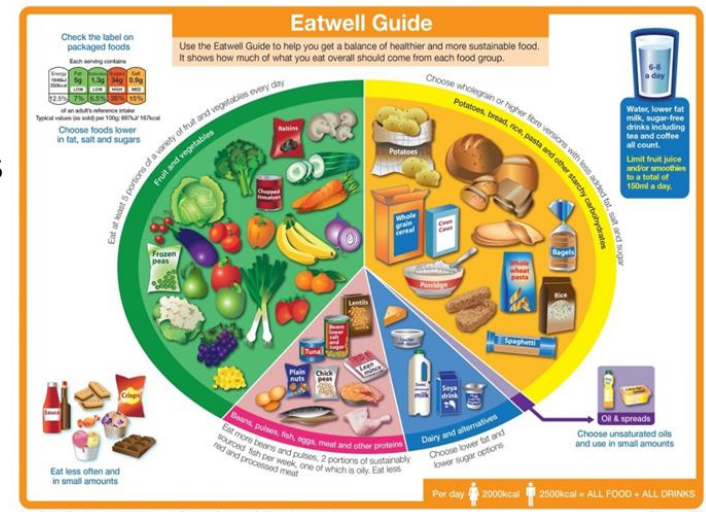


Smoking and alcohol - Offer a referral to a local stop smoking service. The safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all. For those who do drink recommend no more than 14 units per week.

Diet - messages for children, young people and their parents/carers

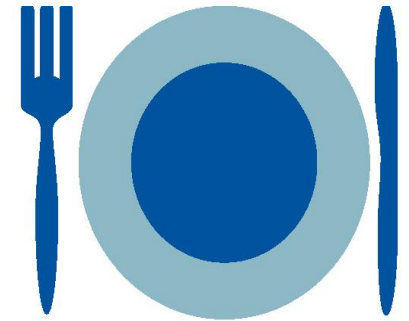
Promote the Eatwell Guide to support children and young people to get the healthy balanced diet ¹⁹;

- Eat at least five portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables a day.
- Ensure portion sizes are appropriate – start meals with small servings and let children/young people ask for more if they're still hungry. Avoid giving adult-sized plates to younger children – it can encourage them to eat too much. Offer 'me size meals'
- Foods which are high in fat, salt or sugar should be eaten infrequently and in small amounts.
- Snack check – a handy tip when buying package snacks is to look for '100kcal, two a day max'.
- Drink plenty of fluids i.e. water and milk – the government recommends 6-8 cups/glasses a day. Recommend for only milk or water to be drunk between meals and adding sugar to drinks should be avoided. Squashes sweetened with sugar, fizzy drinks, soft drinks and juice drinks have no place in a child's daily diet ¹⁹.



Meal times - messages for children, young people and their parents/carers

School meals are a great choice for children, but if parents /carers choose to make a packed lunch for them instead, recommend using the Change4life healthier lunchboxes hints and tips to help them decide what to put in their child's lunchbox [19](#).



Family meals are important - studies show families who have regular meals at the table with no distractions (such as television) are more likely to be a healthy weight [20](#).

Encourage families to prepare healthy meals at home. This way parents /carers can control what they put in food. Recommend using healthier ingredients, and controlling how much sugar and salt is used [20](#).

Young people are more likely to make food choices for themselves. Encourage children, young people and their parents/carers to read food labels. Food labels contain nutrition information per 100g and can help individuals choose a more balanced diet by keeping a check on the amount of foods they are eating that are high in fat, salt, sugars and calories [21](#). Promote the [Change4Life Food Scanner app](#).

Physical Activity - messages for children, young people and their parents/carers

Encourage all children (5-18 years) to engage in moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity for at least 60 minutes per day across the week. This can include all forms of activity such as physical education, active travel, after school activities, play and sports [22](#).

Ask children and families to check out what fun, free/low-cost, healthy lifestyle programmes are available in their local area which may support them to be more active such as; after school clubs, local leisure centres and parks or community centres [22](#).

Children and young people should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (sitting), and when possible should break up long periods of not moving with at least light activity [23](#).

Physical activity
for children and young people
(5-18 Years)

BUILDS CONFIDENCE & SOCIAL SKILLS
DEVELOPS CO-ORDINATION
IMPROVES CONCENTRATION & LEARNING
STRENGTHENS MUSCLES & BONES
IMPROVES HEALTH & FITNESS
MAINTAINS HEALTHY WEIGHT
IMPROVES SLEEP
MAKES YOU FEEL GOOD

Be physically active

Spread activity throughout the day
All activities should make you breathe faster & feel warmer

Aim for an average of at least **60** minutes per day across week

PLAY
RUN/WALK
BIKE
ACTIVE TRAVEL
SWIM
SKATE
SPORT
PE
SKIP
CLIMB
WORKOUT
DANCE

Activities to develop movement skills, and muscle and bone strength **ACROSS WEEK**

Get strong
INACTIVITY
Move more

Find ways to help all children and young people accumulate an average of at least 60 minutes physical activity per day across the week

UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines, 2019

Oral health - messages for children, young people and their parents/carers



Tooth extraction was the most common reason for hospital admission for children aged 5 to 9 years old ⁴.

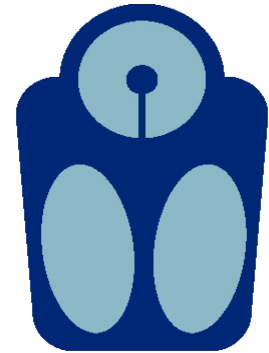
Recommend for all children to brush teeth twice daily with fluoride toothpaste (1350-1500 ppm) last thing at night and at least on one other occasion. After brushing do not rinse. 3 to 6 year olds should use a pea-sized amount of paste. Parents/carers should be made aware that the permanent molars erupt at around 6 years of age ²⁵.

As part of a daily oral health routine for young people (12-18 years) in addition to brushing, it is important to advise them to clean between the teeth using interdental brushes ²⁶.

Recommend for parents/carers to always ask for sugar-free medicines.

Continue to visit the dentist on a regular basis. NHS dental treatment is free for children under 18 or under 19 and in qualifying full-time education ²⁶.

Healthy weight – messages for children, young people and their parents/carers

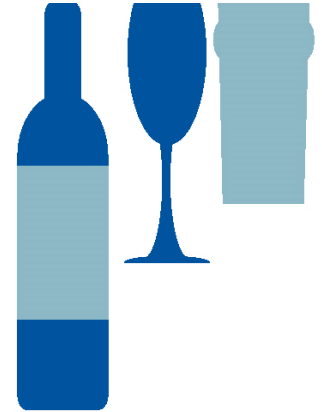


Advise parents/carers to adopt and model the Eatwell Guide to get a healthy balanced diet. Encourage parents / carers to be active daily, aiming to achieve at least 150 minutes of physical activity over a week through a variety of activities.

Children, young people and parents/carers with excess weight or who are at particular risk of obesity can be supported by a health and care professional such as a practice nurse, school nurse or GP. For those children and young people above the 91st BMI centile or those adults with a BMI greater than 25, offer to make a referral to a local weight management service [27](#).

One of the best ways to instil good habits in children and young people is to have positive role models. Any changes to a child's diet and lifestyle are much more likely to be accepted if they involve the whole family. One of the most powerful ways to encourage children and young people to eat a healthier balanced diet and be active is to advise parents/carers to lead by example [28](#).

Alcohol - messages for children, young people and their parents/carers



Children, young people and their parents/carers should be advised that an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option. However, if children drink alcohol, it should not be until at least the age of 15 years

29.

If young people aged 15 to 17 years consume alcohol, it should always be with the guidance of a parent or carer or in a supervised environment. Parents and young people should be made aware that drinking, even at age 15 or older, can be hazardous to health and that not drinking is the healthiest option for young people 29.

No-one can say that drinking alcohol is absolutely safe, but the Chief Medical Officers' guideline for both men and women is that you are safest not to drink regularly more than 14 units per week, to keep health risks from drinking alcohol to a low level. If parents/carers do drink as much as 14 units per week, advise them that it is best to spread this over 3 days or more. A good way to help achieve this is to have several drink-free days each week. Advise parents/carers that alcohol can contribute to weight gain in and also impair their ability to parent and respond to emergencies 30.

Smoking- messages for Children, young people and their parents/carers



Children/young people who grow up with a parent or family member who smokes are three times more likely to start smoking themselves ³¹.

Encourage parents/carers to lead by example and quit. As well as improving their own health, they're improving their children's health, who may also be less likely to start smoking later in life ³¹.

Cigarettes are addictive, and self-control alone might not be enough for you to stop entirely. Research has shown that using a stop smoking aid such as Nicotine Replacement Therapy is most effective if used alongside support from an NHS stop smoking service. Find your nearest NHS stop smoking service from the NHS Smokefree website, or call 0300 123 1044 ³². If they don't want to take up this option, suggest stop smoking aids (prescription tablets, nicotine replacement therapy or e-cigarettes) to improve their chances of quitting successfully.

Mental health and wellbeing- messages for children, young people and their parents/carers



Children's social and emotional wellbeing is important in its own right but also because it affects their physical health (both as a child and as an adult) and can determine how well they do at school. Good social, emotional and psychological health helps protect children against emotional and behavioural problems, violence and crime, teenage pregnancy and the misuse of drugs and alcohol.

Children who are exposed to difficult situations such as bullying or racism, or who are coping with socially disadvantaged circumstances are at higher risk. They may include: looked after children (including those who have subsequently been adopted), those living in families where there is conflict or instability, those who persistently refuse to go to school, those who have experienced adverse life events (such as bereavement or parental separation), and those who have been exposed to abuse or violence.

Encourage children, young people and their parents/carers to be aware of their emotional wellbeing, knowing when they should seek help and have support systems in place can help prevent issues becoming more serious ³³.

Mental health and wellbeing- messages for children, young people and their parents/carers

Promote the Five Ways to wellbeing (connect, be active, take notice, keep learning, give).

Identify and assess children who are showing early signs of anxiety, emotional distress or behavioural problems. The assessment should be carried out in line with the Common Assessment Framework (to ensure effective communications with the relevant services) and using other appropriate tools ³³.

Discuss the options for tackling these problems with the child and their parents or carers. Agree an action plan, as the first stage of a 'stepped care' approach (as defined in the NICE guideline on depression in children and young people) ³⁴.



Resources

Resources

SKILLS

1. MECC, for more information on Free training and resources to support you with healthy conversation skills check out - <https://www.e-lfh.org.uk/programmes/making-every-contact-count/> or www.makeeverycontactcount.co.uk
2. The '[Lets talk about weight](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-weight-management-short-conversations-with-patients)' resources provide practical advice and tools to support health and care professionals make brief interventions in weight management with children and families; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-weight-management-short-conversations-with-patients> and adults; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adult-weight-management-a-guide-to-brief-interventions>

KNOWLEDGE

1. Evidence and guidance on childhood obesity, to help families and communities intervene and help change eating and activity habits. Childhood obesity: applying All Our Health <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childhood-obesity-applying-all-our-health/childhood-obesity-applying-all-our-health>
2. For more information on calories, snacks, sugar, fat and 5-a day visit Change4life <https://www.nhs.uk/change4life-beta/food-facts/calories#ZfMFISXhSypHe2gR.97>
3. For lunch box ideas, visit Change4life: <https://www.nhs.uk/change4life-beta/recipes/healthier-lunchboxes#5R9bH3gHvhlb5w8x.97>

Resources

4. Guide to reading food labels, visit NHS choices:

<https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/food-labelling.aspx>

5. Physical activity infographics 2019: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-guidelines-infographics>

6. Measuring impact – Everyday Interactions Toolkit <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/measuring-public-health-impact.html>

7. Infographic: Improving oral health for children and young people for health visitors, school nurses and practice nurses <https://vivbennett.blog.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/90/2016/11/Improving-oral-health-for-children.pdf>

8. All Our Health - Children's oral health <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-oral-health-applying-all-our-health/child-oral-health-applying-all-our-health>

9. [A quick guide to a healthy mouth in children/ a quick guide to a healthy mouth in adults](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/delivering-better-oral-health-an-evidence-based-toolkit-for-prevention)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/delivering-better-oral-health-an-evidence-based-toolkit-for-prevention>

10. NICE (2010) Quitting Smoking in Pregnancy and Following Childbirth (PH26)
<http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph26>

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11. Smoking in Pregnancy Challenge Group (2015). Shared Key Messages
<http://smokefreeaction.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/SiPKeyMsgs.pdf>
12. Change4life Healthier lunchbox hints and tips <https://www.nhs.uk/change4life/recipes/healthier-lunchboxes#DVzOgOIEJlEffdB.97>
13. Guidance on the consumption of alcohol by children and young people:
http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130103185806/http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_110258
14. Public Health England. Delivering better oral health: an evidence-based toolkit for prevention (updated 2017) this is an evidence based toolkit to support dental teams in improving their patient's oral and general health
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/605266/Delivering_better_oral_health.pdf.
15. Public Health England (2017) Guidance, Health Matters: Child Dental Health. Available at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-child-dental-health/health-matters-child-dental-health>
16. Use of electronic cigarettes in pregnancy: a guide for midwives and other healthcare professionals
<http://smokefreeaction.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/eCigSIP.pdf>

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2. Public Health England (2015) Childhood obesity: applying All Our Health. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childhood-obesity-applying-all-our-health/childhood-obesity-applying-all-our-health#guidance>
3. Public Health England (2017) Guidance, Health Matters: Child Dental Health. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-child-dental-health/health-matters-child-dental-health>
4. Public Health England (2016) School aged years 5-19 High Impact Area 3: Improving lifestyles. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/564093/School_aged_years_high_impact_area3_promoting_healthy_lifestyles.pdf
5. Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, December 2019. Available at: <http://www.sportengland.org/media/14325/active-lives-children-survey-academic-year-18-19.pdf>
6. Public Health England (2015) Health Matters: Smoking and quitting in England <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-smoking-and-quitting-in-england/smoking-and-quitting-in-england>
7. Farley, A.C., Hajek, P., Lycett, D., and Aveyard, P. (2012) Interventions for preventing weight gain after smoking cessation (Review). Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews
8. NHS Digital (2017) Health survey for England 2016 Children's health; key findings <https://files.digital.nhs.uk/publication/m/c/hse2016-child-health.pdf>
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10. Public Health England (2018) Guidance on Adult Obesity: Applying All Our Health. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childhood-obesity-applying-all-our-health/childhood-obesity-applying-all-our-health>
11. National Obesity Observatory (2011) Obesity and mental health. NHS
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