

# A Parent's Guide to Understanding and Treating Childhood Obesity as a Chronic Disease

As a parent, navigating health information can be challenging and confusing, especially when it comes to your child's weight. We understand. This guide is here to offer a new, effective, and supportive way to think about and address your child's health. We want to partner with you to move away from blame and stigma and toward compassionate, science-based care. This means shifting away from the idea of a "quick fix" and embracing a long-term partnership to manage a health condition that, like asthma or diabetes, will be part of your child's life.

Childhood obesity is one of the most common pediatric chronic diseases, affecting 14.4 million children and adolescents in the United States. It is essential to understand this not as a personal choice or a failure of willpower, but as a complex medical condition. Research from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) shows that it has intricate contributors, including:

- Genetic factors
- Physiologic processes
- Socioeconomic conditions
- Environmental influences

Understanding that obesity is a chronic disease is the first and most important step toward providing your child with the effective, compassionate care they deserve.

## 1. What Does It Mean for Obesity to Be a "Chronic Disease"?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines a chronic disease as a condition that lasts for a year or more and requires ongoing medical attention. Like asthma or diabetes, obesity is not something that can be "cured" with a short-term fix.

This journey isn't one you take alone. As the first step, we form a partnership—provider, child, and family—to navigate this up-and-down path together, providing consistent, supportive care over your child's life course. This approach recognizes the complex nature of the disease, which is often characterized by periods of response to treatment and periods of relapse, and works with its rhythms, rather than against them.

**This is a medical condition, not a matter of willpower. It is never the fault of the child or the parent.**

This understanding frees us from blame and allows us to focus on what truly works: a collaborative and health-focused approach to treatment.

## 2. Our Approach: A Health-Focused, Family-Centered Partnership

Our treatment philosophy is built on a foundation of respect, science, and partnership. We are not here to treat your child's body size; we are here to treat the underlying metabolic conditions that can affect their long-term health. Our goal is to work *with* you and your child, as a team, for a healthier future.

### Our Core Principles

- **Focus on Health, Not Weight** Success is not measured by the number on the scale. Instead, we measure success by improvements in key health markers—like blood pressure, cholesterol, and liver function—and your child's overall physical and emotional well-being.
- **We Never Diet Children** Decades of evidence confirm that putting children on restrictive diets is medically and psychologically harmful. It often leads to weight cycling, nutritional deficiencies, and can trigger the very disordered eating behaviors we work to prevent. Instead, our treatment focuses on joyful, structured family meals to restore the body's natural hunger and fullness cues.
- **Size Acceptance is Key** We firmly believe that human bodies come in all shapes and sizes. A child's health and worth are not determined by their weight. We work to create a shame-free environment where your child is respected and celebrated for who they are.
- **A Long-Term Team** Because obesity is a chronic disease, our relationship is a continuous and coordinated partnership. We are here to navigate this journey with you, your child, and your family, providing ongoing support and adjusting the plan as your child grows and their needs change.

These principles guide *what we believe*. Now, let's explore *what we do* based on the latest scientific evidence.

## 3. What Does Modern, Evidence-Based Treatment Look Like?

Modern treatment is comprehensive, tailored to each child and family, and moves far beyond the old advice to "eat less and move more." It combines intensive family-based support with powerful new medical tools when they are needed.

### The Foundation: Family-Based Support

The primary treatment recommended by the AAP is **Intensive Health Behavior and Lifestyle Treatment (IHBLT)**. This is not a diet plan. It is a family-centered program that includes:

- **At least 26 hours** of face-to-face support over several months.
- A focus on practical, skill-building education around nutrition and joyful physical activity.
- Guidance on behavior change strategies that the whole family can use.

- **A Supportive Team:** Your family will work with a team of specialists which may include registered dietitians, physical activity experts, and behavioral health providers, all coordinated with your primary care provider.

IHBLT is the cornerstone of care and is always used, even when other treatments are added.

### **New Tools: Medications that Restore Balance**

For some adolescents, IHBLT alone may not be enough to address the underlying metabolic issues. In these cases, we may recommend modern medications, such as GLP-1 agonists (e.g. semaglutide, tirzepatide), as a tool to be used alongside lifestyle treatment.

- **Treatment is Based on Medical Data, Not Body Size:** A decision to use medication is based only on objective evidence from lab tests and health metrics that show metabolic dysfunction (like insulin resistance) or other medical issues. We never prescribe these medications based on BMI, appearance, or a desire for weight loss alone.
- **Restoring the Body's Communication:** These medications help restore the body's natural communication system, addressing the mismatch between hunger and fullness signals. They are not "diet drugs" but tools to correct a hormonal imbalance, much like insulin for diabetes. They also have protective benefits for the heart, kidneys, and brain.
- **Long-Term, Monitored Care:** These are powerful medications that require long-term use and careful monitoring by a healthcare provider, just like any treatment for a chronic condition.

This comprehensive approach is crucial because it allows us to protect your child's health from multiple angles.

## **4. Why This Approach Matters for Your Child's Future**

The goal of this modern, non-stigmatizing approach is to protect your child from two distinct but equally serious types of harm.

1. **The Harm of Untreated Medical Conditions** By focusing on and treating the underlying metabolic dysfunction, we can help prevent or resolve serious health consequences that can develop in childhood and continue into adulthood, including:
  - Type 2 diabetes and prediabetes
  - Nonalcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD)
  - High blood pressure and high cholesterol
  - Joint problems and sleep apnea
2. **The Harm of Weight Stigma and Diet Culture** This medical approach *actively protects* your child from the significant psychological damage caused by weight stigma and diet culture. By treating the underlying biology, we avoid the harmful cycle of restriction, guilt, and weight fluctuation that can lead to disordered eating and a negative relationship with food and their body.

Our ultimate goal is to support a child who is both medically healthy and emotionally resilient, free to grow and thrive.

## **5. Your Next Step: Let's Talk**

We know this is a lot of information, and you may have many questions. Please remember, you and your family are not alone in this. Effective, compassionate, and evidence-based treatment is available, and we are here to help you navigate it.

The next step is to start a conversation. Please call our Intake team, on their dedicated intake line, 971.319.6800, for a free and confidential discussion about your concerns. Or visit [kartinclinic.com](http://kartinclinic.com) for more information about our programs.

We look forward to partnering with you.