



If Your Baby Seems Fat (0 to 6 months)



Most of your child's size and shape is determined by heredity: the size and shape of his mother and father. You can't (and mustn't try to) control the size and shape of the body he develops. If you try to make your child thin, it can make him fatter than he might be otherwise. Some children grow up to be relatively tall and slender, others are more solid and muscular, still others are on the fat side. Any of these body types may be normal for your child.

Some children, however, get fatter than nature intended them to be. You can help your child to get the body that is right for him by doing the best job you possibly can with feeding, starting at birth. Maintain a division of responsibility in feeding. You are responsible for *what* your child is offered to eat, and for offering it in a positive and supportive fashion. He is responsible for *how much* of it he eats, and even *whether* he eats. If you react to your child's normal growth patterns by trying take over his job of deciding how much to eat, you are likely to make him fatter, not thinner.

Babies get fatter

During the first few months, your child grows very fast and puts on fat. He doubles his body weight by age 4 months, and triples it by one year. He gets longer and heavier; his body and arms and legs fill out. He develops a round stomach that sticks out, and the shape of his face changes, probably getting rounder and fatter-looking. In fact, compared with what he looked like as a newborn, your baby may start looking fat to you. Don't worry. His increased fatness is normal.

At birth, the infant's body is only about 11% body fat. By age one year, body fat increases to 24%. His getting fatter is normal and desirable. Fat is important in his little body as a source of energy in case of illness, and for insulation and support for internal organs.

Fat babies don't stay fat

Many people are alarmed when their babies are fat. Speculation from the 1960's, later proven to be wrong, still haunts today's parents. Hirsch's fat cell theory said that babies who were fat developed too

many fat cells. In later life, continued the theory, those fat cells were just waiting to be filled up. People who were fat as infants had an increased risk of being fat in later life.

Hirsch may have been right about fat cells, but he was wrong about *people*. A number of studies since that time, done with *people*, showed that fat babies are no more likely to grow up fat than thin babies. Children go through periods of fatness, but slim down as part of the natural growth process. The great majority of fat infants grow up to be normal weight adults. However, studies show that children who have feeding problems early on do have an increased risk of being fat in later life. How do you avoid feeding problems? Do the best job of feeding that you possibly can. Observe and maintain a division of responsibility in feeding. Don't try to get your child to eat more or less than he wants to.

Is your child abnormally fat?

Yes, your child may seem fat. But is that fatness normal for him? The only way to tell is by examining his growth chart [see WHAT IS NORMAL GROWTH?]. Your child's fatness is likely to be normal for him if he's following consistently along a particular percentile curve, even a relatively high percentile curve. Look at whether his growth is smooth and predictable, rather than at how heavy he is. Keep in mind that a single measurement does *not* give you the information you need. It tells you only how your child compares with other children. It doesn't show you his growth pattern.

Some professionals say that children are too fat if they plot out at the 90th to 95th percentile curve or higher, weight for height. But that guideline doesn't apply if your child has *always* plotted out that way. Some children are just heavier: They have bigger bones or heavier muscles and, yes, some children have more body fat.

What is abnormal weight gain?

Don't assume that if your baby eats a lot or grows quickly that he'll be fat. Some children just have relatively big appetites. Some grow quite fast and still stay on their percentile curves. On the other hand,

some babies shift rapidly across percentile curves on their growth charts. Their weight might climb from the 25th to the 75th percentile curve or even the 90th percentile curve in one 6-month period. Over the next 6 months, weight either levels off or continues to climb. Such rapid shifts in growth need to be explained: They could be normal, or they could be disrupted growth [see WHY IS YOUR BABY GAINING TOO MUCH WEIGHT?]. Ask for an appointment with the dietitian or other health professional who understands feeding if:

- Your child's growth veers upward abruptly.
- You are making no progress getting on your baby's wave length with feeding.
- You worry a lot about your baby's eating or growth.
- You and your baby struggle about his eating.

Preventing abnormal fatness

If you want to protect your child from abnormal fatness, feed him in the best way you can. Pick out the proper food for him [see SELECTING SOLID FOODS FOR YOUR BABY], and tune in to the signals he gives you about how he wants to be fed. Respect his hunger and fullness, and let him do the rest.

Be careful not to be controlling with feeding. Parents of large or enthusiastically eating children often hesitate to let them eat as much as they want for fear they will get fat. In other words, they have difficulty trusting their baby to do his part with feeding. You may be controlling without realizing it. Check yourself. Do you find yourself consistently being too active in feeding? Do you have trouble going along with what your baby tells you? Do you try to get your baby to stop eating before he indicates he's finished? Do you try to make him wait to eat when he shows he's hungry? The problem might be that you are overly worried about your child's size and shape. On the other hand, you may have a controlling tendency. If you are too controlling, feeding will not go well. If you can't let go of control, seek professional help. A modest amount of help now can make an enormous difference in the long run.

Working with your baby

You can help your child avoid unnecessary fatness in later life by establishing a positive feeding relationship early on. Your baby knows how much he needs to eat. Work to calm him, feed in a smooth, continuous fashion, and let him decide when to start and stop eating. As he gets older, he won't be hungry every time he asks for your attention. He'll want you to take time with him, to pay attention, to make sounds with you and to play with you.

Your job is to nurture: Let *him* be in charge of when, where, and how much he eats. If you try to

take over and feed your baby less than he wants, he may get worried that he won't get enough to eat. He could end up eating more. Trying to control your baby's eating can interfere with his normal growth and make him fatter than he would be otherwise.

What about inherited fatness?

Fatness is not desirable in our culture, so you would want to spare your child from it if you could. Given his genetics, fatness may be normal for your child. There is no doubt that children tend to resemble the body fatness of their parents. That being the case, you must face up to a hard truth: Despite your best efforts, your child may grow up to be fat and there won't be anything you can do to change it.

Because of your own struggles with weight, you may be tempted to try to control or modify your child's weight. Don't. It is better to put your efforts into feeling good about your child and helping him feel good about himself. Furthermore, at this early age, you can't tell if your child will be thin, fat, or in-between when he grows up. Relax if you can, do the best job you possibly can with feeding, and let nature take its course. That may seem risky, but the alternative is far more risky. When parents and children struggle with eating, children are more likely to become fatter as they grow up. Both feeding problems and worries about fatness are associated with struggles about eating. These struggles interfere with the child's ability to eat the right amount of food to grow well.

These struggles, in fact, may have been a part of your history if you have had periods of rapid weight gain. As a consequence, you may be heavier than nature intended you to be. Feeding your child well will help protect him from such unnecessary fatness.

To reassure yourself about your child's eating and growth, see Ellyn Satter's *Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense*, Bull Publishing, 2000.

To understand more about your own eating and to learn to feed yourself as well as your family lovingly and well, see Ellyn Satter's *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*.