

Focus On

Healthy weight in childhood



ACT
Government

ACT Health

Why is it important to have a healthy weight?

Excess weight is a major risk factor for chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes, some musculoskeletal conditions and cancers¹.

The higher the level of excess weight a person carries regardless their age, the higher their risk of developing health and wellbeing issues. Obesity in childhood is associated with early onset of chronic diseases, a higher chance of obesity, low self-esteem leading to psychosocial problems, disability and premature death in adulthood^{1,2}. The main cause of overweight and obesity is often an imbalance in energy intake versus energy use leading to a positive energy balance over a prolonged period of time². Frequent intake of discretionary foods such as fast food, snacks, confectionery, sugary drinks, excess portion sizes, lack of physical activity and a sedentary life style are some of the contributory factors to a positive energy balance^{2,3}.

Underweight, although not as prevalent as overweight or obesity in Australia, also leads to poor growth and development, decreased immunity leading to frequent infections and premature death⁴.

Therefore, it is important that all children are encouraged to maintain a healthy body weight for their age to ensure normal growth and development, reduced risk of short- and long-term illness and death⁴.

How do we assess healthy weight?

$$\text{BMI} = \frac{\text{Weight (kg)}}{\text{Height}^2 (\text{m}^2)}$$

Body Mass Index (BMI) is the most common measure used to assess weight status at a population level. Factors such as muscle mass, ethnicity, and puberty can all affect

BMI; however, these factors average out across a large number of people.

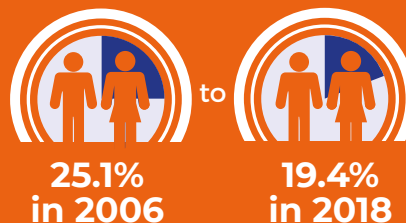
BMI is calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by height, in metres squared. For children, the BMI value is plotted against the World Health Organization's [BMI for age \(5-19 years\) growth reference charts](#).

The picture in the ACT

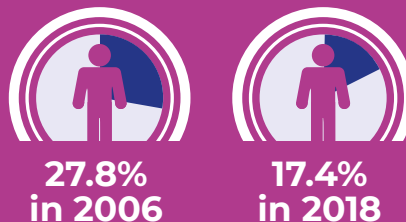
Trends over time

The ACT Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey (ACTPANS) is a health survey that has been conducted every 3 years since 2006. Around 1500 Year 6 students from primary schools across the ACT participate in ACTPANS each time. Information about physical activity, nutrition and weight status are collected. Height and weight are also measured by trained professionals in a private setting.

Overall there has been a downward trend in prevalence in overweight and obesity in ACT Year 6 students, from



For males, there has been a significant decline in prevalence of overweight and obesity from



however, the proportion of overweight and obese females has been stable over the same period (Figure 1).

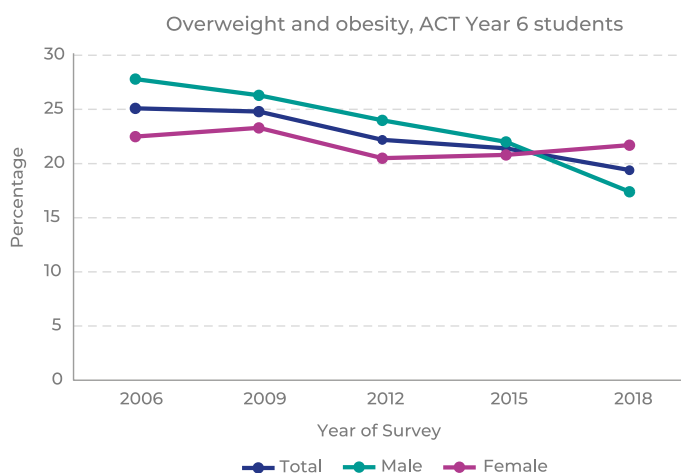


Figure 1: Overweight and obesity, ACT Year 6 students (Source: ACTPANS 2006-2018)¹

¹ For statistical analysis, we have used, Cole and Lobstein's⁵ BMI cut offs based on the reformulated International Obesity Task Force (IOTF) childhood BMI cut-offs for overweight, obesity and thinness.

Distribution by sex

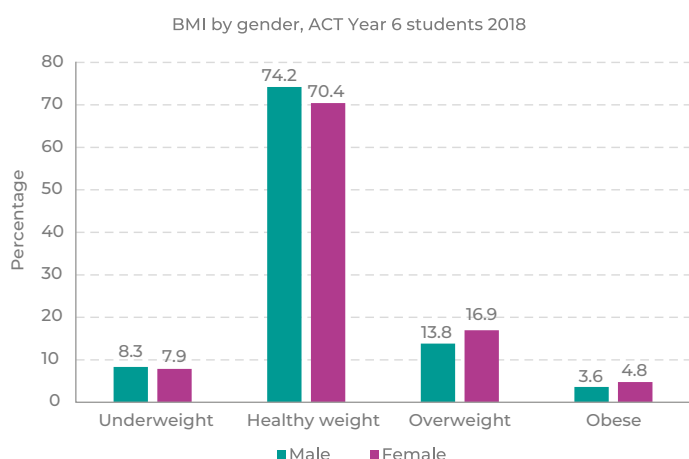


Figure 2: BMI by gender, ACT Year 6 students (Source: ACTPANS 2018)¹

The difference in the prevalence of healthy weight between male and female Year 6 students is not statistically significant in 2018.

What are we doing to help?

Future surveys will continue to provide important insights into the health and wellbeing status of ACT children. Results to date highlight the importance of continued implementation of health and wellbeing programs at the population level and in school settings with a focus on:

- Reducing unhealthy food and drink consumption
- Reinforcing importance of healthy eating habits
- Improving physical activity, including reducing sedentary behaviours
- Building knowledge and capacity in children, parents and school communities.

The ACT Government has several initiatives in place to improve the health and wellbeing of the young people in the ACT. Click on the icons below to find out more about these programs.

For personalised advice from a dietitian:

Contact Women, Youth and Children Nutrition Service run by Canberra Health Services. Find more information using this link <http://www.health.act.gov.au/our-services/nutrition/women-youth-children-nutrition-service>. This is a free service.

The Eating Disorders Program run by Canberra Health Services provides assessment and therapy programs for people with an eating disorder. Find more information using this link <https://www.health.act.gov.au/services-and-programs/mental-health/eating-disorders-program>. This is a free service.

Alternatively, you can choose a dietitian using Dietitians Association Australia's Find and Accredited Practising dietitian webpage <https://daa.asn.au/find-an-apid/>. Fees may apply for this service.

References

1. World Health Organization (2018), Obesity and overweight accessed via <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight>
2. Sahoo et al (2015), Childhood obesity: causes and consequences, Journal of family Medicine and Primary Care accessed via <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4408699/>
3. Lakshman et al (2012), Childhood Obesity, Circulation, American Heart Association accessed via <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3785130/>
4. National Health and Medical Research Council (2013), The Australian Dietary Guidelines accessed via https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/n55_australian_dietary_guidelines.pdf
5. Cole TJ & Lobstein T (2012), Extended international (IOTF) body mass index cut-offs for thinness, overweight and obesity, *Pediatric Obesity*, V.7, I.4, pp 284-294. Accessed via <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.2047-6310.2012.00064.x>