

# Body Mass Index and BMI-for-Age

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## Questions and Answers for Parents

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Children are unique and grow at different rates. Your child's pattern of growth can give you information about her overall health and lifestyle. To see your child's growth pattern, regular weight and height measurements need to be taken.

This information sheet explains Body Mass Index and BMI-for-age.

### What is Body Mass Index (BMI)?

One measure used to look at health is the BMI. BMI is a tool to measure weight status in children and adults. BMI compares weight to height.

### What is BMI-for-age?

BMI in children is called "BMI-for-age", and can be used starting at age two. It is used to assess children's growth over time during their growing years. BMI decreases during preschool years, then increases as your child grows into adulthood, and reflects how your child's body is changing and developing. This is why it is called BMI-for-age.

Your child's BMI is plotted on a BMI-for-age chart by a health care provider. This chart has lines called percentiles like the height and weight growth charts you may have seen. Since boys and girls grow at different rates, there are different BMI-for-age charts for boys and girls.

For example, the table below shows how a boy's BMI changes as he grows while he stays at the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile.

Age	BMI	Percentile
2 years	17.6	75 <sup>th</sup>
4 years	16.4	75 <sup>th</sup>
9 years	17.6	75 <sup>th</sup>
13 years	20.4	75 <sup>th</sup>

### What does my child's BMI-for-age tell me?

If your child's BMI value is on the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile, that would mean that out of 100 children of the same age and sex as your child, 75 of them will have a lower BMI and 25 will have a higher BMI.

BMI-for-age can be used to help assess if your child is underweight, overweight or at-risk for overweight. BMI-for-Age value that is below the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile suggests that your child is underweight. A BMI-for-age value that is between the 85<sup>th</sup> and 95<sup>th</sup> percentile suggests that your child is at-risk of being overweight, and a BMI-for-age value that is on or above the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile indicates that your child is overweight.

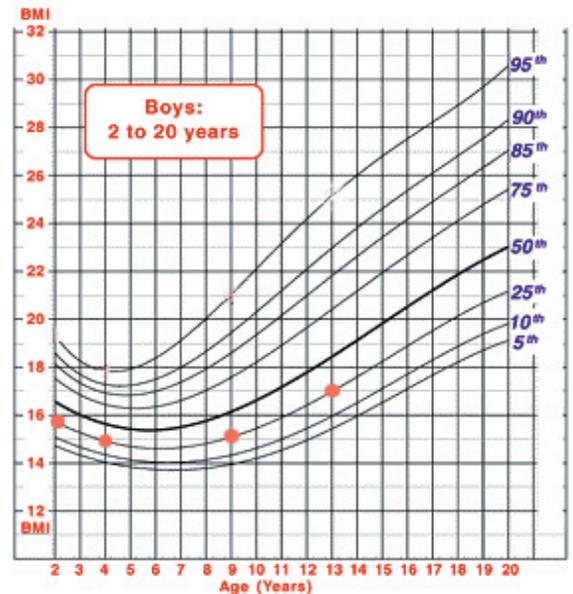
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For example, Sam's BMI-for-age is on the 25th percentile curve. This means that out of 100 children the same sex and age as Sam, fewer than 25 children have a BMI lower than his. Because Sam's BMI-for-age value falls between the 5th and 85th percentiles, his BMI-for-age is considered to be in the normal range. Sam is neither underweight, at risk of overweight nor overweight.

## Help support your child's healthy growth

You can help your child develop life-long habits that will protect and promote his health. Some ideas are listed below.

- Focus on a healthy lifestyle and healthy growth will follow. Help your child enjoy healthy eating and physical activity.
- Encourage your child to eat well. One way to do this is to eat meals together as a family.
- Make healthy foods the easy choice for the whole family. Keep fruits, vegetables, whole grains, milk products, meats and alternatives available for meals and snacks.
- Follow Canada's Food Guide to plan healthy meals and learn about healthy portion sizes.
- Help your child take pleasure in all foods. Avoid referring to foods as 'good' or 'bad'.
- Help your child listen to her body's needs – eat when hungry and stop when satisfied.
- Have fun being physically active with family members or with friends.
- Limit time spent in front of the TV, computer and video games.
- Make your home a place where everyone feels special. Help your child feel good for being who they are, and not for being a certain body size or shape.
- Pay attention to the language you use as a family. Replace comments such as "I look fat in this." or "I need to lose 10 pounds to squeeze into those pants.", with comments that support body acceptance. Focus on your good qualities and treat your body with respect and love by taking care of it. Eat well, be active and be kind to yourself.
- Be aware that words can have a positive or negative effect on children. Children can be very sensitive about their changing bodies. Tell your child that her changing body is normal. Your reassuring words will have a positive effect on how your child feels about her body.
- Children copy their parents. Be a good role model for your child.



Reference: National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, CDC Growth Chart Training Modules, Using the BMI-for-age Growth Charts, Accessed March 19, 2005 at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/growthcharts/training/modules/module1/text/mainmodules.htm>

**For more nutrition information, visit our website at:**  
[www.dietitians.ca](http://www.dietitians.ca) and [www.calgaryhealthregion.ca](http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca)

This resource was developed by the staff of the Calgary Health Region, and reviewed by the Alberta Provincial Nutritionists, Dietitians of Canada Pediatric Nutrition Network, including Janet Schlenker, Annie Vallieres, Shefali Raja, and the registered dietitians of the Sudbury & District Health Unit. This information sheet is endorsed by Dietitians of Canada.