If you have an overweight child, you’re not alone. Almost one in three children is significantly overweight. Obesity in kids has increased by 54% in the last 15 years. You are experiencing a problem that is becoming increasingly common.

**How did it happen?**

There are many factors that may be contributing to your child’s excess weight. Among them are:

1. **Biological Contributors.** Studies reveal that fatness does travel in families. If one parent is obese, a child has a 40% chance of becoming obese too. If both parents are obese that risk jumps to 70%. Having a genetic predisposition to being overweight may mean your child will never look like a toothpick and will probably need to eat a little less and be more active than his wiry friends to maintain a healthy weight.

2. **Life Events.** Often an illness, death, job problem, economic hardship, marital difficulties, alcohol or other drug problems in the family can trigger weight gain in kids. This is particularly likely with quiet, depressed or “sensitive” children.

3. **Diet.** Common eating patterns that lead to overweight include skipping meals, snacking excessively in afternoons and eating mostly high-fat, high-sugar foods.

4. **Exercise.** Chances are your child is inactive and spends a significant amount of time in front of the T.V. or video games.

5. **Moods.** Sometimes eating is a way that children learn to block feelings of depression, anxiety or try to overcome a low self-esteem.

6. **Family Diet and Exercise.** If the environment at home is stocked with fatty, sugary foods, you can expect the child to fill up on them. What’s more, parents’ food patterns and exercise habits have a great influence on a child’s practices.

7. **Family and Outside Influences.** If a family is having trouble functioning, often a child will be more likely to gain weight. Also, school, church, day care and extended families can have a definite impact on your child’s food and activity choices.
What can I do?

Begin by taking a close look at your family’s health habits. Sit down and determine some specific goals that you would like to achieve for yourself, your child and family. These may involve anything from making diet and exercise changes to feeling better or improving communication patterns.

Keep in mind that changing habits is very different from going on a crash diet. Dieting is not only an ineffective way to approach your child’s weight problem, but is potentially harmful as well.

While deciding on habits you want to change, consider the following tips:

1. **Measure weight no more than once a week.** Daily weight doesn’t give you information about changes in body fat but weekly weight does. You can expect a loss of one-half to two pounds a week if you are making effective habit changes.

2. **Pick habits you’re ready to change.** If your child loves pizza, don’t cut it out completely – settle on every other week, rather than every week.

3. **Give your child a limited range of choices.** Your child needs guidance, but an option to exert his/her independence. Propose several changes and let your child choose one or two that they feel comfortable making.

4. **Plan small wins.** Children tend to set unrealistic goal that are sure to fail. Set small, tangible steps towards a larger goal.

5. **Teach your child how to make trade-offs.** When your child demands a chocolate fudge sundae, ask him how he plans to adjust his diet or activity level to make up for it.

6. **Avoid the perfectionist trap.** If you change a habit four out of seven days, that is success!

7. **It takes cooperation from all for a child to lose weight.** One family member who insists on your child cleaning his/her plate can reverse all progress. It is the patient’s role to gain support from all significant people in your child’s life.

8. **Work at a shift towards a healthier lifestyle for the whole family.** Rather than focus on your heavier child, make it clear that the changes you are making will benefit every family member.

9. **Increase your nutrition knowledge.** Consider a consultation with a registered dietitian who is familiar with weight management in children to help equip you with the information you need to make appropriate nutrition and lifestyle changes.

For further information and individualized counseling, call:

Vanderbilt University Medical Center
Outpatient Nutrition Clinic
615-322-0069