

Rx: Take control of your child's BMI

Thirteen-year-old Danny Gwartz keeps track of oodles of important numbers: phone numbers, addresses, his shoe size and height — even last Monday's math-test score. Until recently, Danny hadn't given much thought to his body-mass index — or BMI — which doctors say may be the most important number of all.

"I ate some healthy stuff... just not as much as I eat now," Danny said. "I usually ate more than one portion at dinner."

Danny came to Columbus Children's Center for Healthy Weight and Nutrition last November and admitted he was making some poor diet and exercise choices.

The extra pounds developed into more than just lingering baby fat and placed Danny at an increased risk for conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.

"We thought maybe we need to start making the healthy choices now, before it gets too hard for him," Danny's mother, Barb, said.

Because Danny is still growing, doctors aren't focused on helping him lose weight. Instead, they're paying close attention to his BMI, the calculation of how much body fat a person has based



Photo courtesy of Columbus Children's Hospital

Certified athletic trainer Janey McClaskey teaches Danny simple exercises he can do at home.

on age, sex, height and weight.

Doctors enrolled Danny into Columbus Children's NEW U program, a 26-week nutrition and exercise program. The goal is to turn fat into muscle and maintain Danny's current weight as he continues to grow.

"It's so important that children and

their parents understand their BMI," said Center for Healthy Weight and Nutrition Director Dr. Robert Murray. "A child's BMI is one of the most important numbers for determining overall health."

A 2005 report by the Healthy Ohioans initiative shows almost 40 percent of all the state's third-graders are either overweight or at risk for being overweight. Besides highlighting the risk for serious medical conditions, a child's BMI is a good

indicator of whether or not a child will grow into an overweight adult.

In Danny's case, a team of Columbus Children's specialists, including doctors, nurses, psychologists, athletic trainers and dieticians, is helping him make changes. He's learning new games and exercises to encourage physical activity.

He's talking about behaviors and habits that lead to overeating, and he's studying up on healthy snack options and proper portion sizes.

"Meat is supposed to be the size of a deck of cards," Danny said. He also learned that portions of pasta, potatoes and other side dishes should be about the same size as his fist.

"Danny's really doing things on his own," his mom said. "He stops eating when he's not hungry. He exercises more without being told."

Although not every child needs to make such dramatic lifestyle changes, all children and their parents should be BMI-aware. Calculate your child's BMI online at ColumbusChildrens.org.

Murray recommends parents spend a few minutes during each well-child visit discussing their child's BMI and diet and exercise habits. This is the first step toward preventing obesity for a lifetime.

It's a conversation Danny and his mother are glad they started. Today, Danny's weight is holding steady, and his goals for the future continue to evolve.

Experts from the Center for Healthy Weight and Nutrition at Columbus Children's Hospital provided the information for this column.