



How to talk to teens about weight

A guide for parents and caregivers of teenagers aged 13–19

This guide has been developed with inputs from obesity specialists and parents alike.

This information is intended for people living with obesity and should not be substituted for medical advice from your doctor.

The character and its description depicted are for representation purposes only and do not reflect real patient.

Learning how to have positive conversations about weight with your teenager



Contents

Should I talk to my teen about weight?



Weight is a sensitive subject. You might fear that you could do more harm than good if you talk to your teenager about their weight.

Rest assured that, in most cases, it is far better to start a conversation than to avoid it.

Should I talk to my teen about weight?

It is okay to want to talk to your teen about weight



Two thirds of teenagers living with obesity believe weight loss is entirely their responsibility.¹

At the moment, only half of teenagers feel they can discuss their weight honestly with their mum and only a third with their dad.²

Talking to your teen about weight can change their outlook on the future

Should I talk to my teen about weight?

Teens want to lose weight, but do so unsupported

Two thirds of teenagers living with obesity believe weight loss is entirely their responsibility and so are unlikely to ask for help.¹ In fact, over half of teens have attempted to lose weight in the past six months, which may be without their parents' knowledge.¹

At the moment, only half of teenagers feel they can discuss their weight honestly with their mum and only a third with their dad.²

Many parents and caregivers worry that talking about weight or obesity could trigger an eating disorder^{3,4} – but talking about weight in a supportive way is likely to have a positive impact⁴



Conversations about weight can help to change your child's future



Many people mistakenly believe that excess weight is caused by eating too much and not moving enough.⁸

However, obesity is a complex disease that is caused by a wide range of factors. These include our **genes**, changes in **hormones**, **mental health** and outside factors such as **daily routines**, access to **affordable healthier food** and access to **support**.⁹

- Obesity is linked to more than 200 health conditions¹⁰
- 80% of teenagers who visit a doctor to get help with their weight already have one other, serious, related health condition¹¹
- Many people living with obesity experience weight bias,^{12,13} which can impact your child's future

Should I talk to my teen about weight?

Example scenario 1:

Your teenager comes to you to talk about their weight



Make it clear that weight doesn't define who they are. You could mention their character, achievements or intelligence



Ask your teen if they would like support of the whole family



Ask your teen if they would like to talk to a doctor about obesity care



Make it clear that they can talk to you about anything, whenever they want to talk and that you want to help

What can I do to prepare for the conversation?



You may feel like you have spent your whole life understanding your child, then they turn into a teenager and that all changes!

It is crucial before starting a conversation about weight, you feel that you are in the best place mentally and physically, to have a happy and positive conversation.

What can I do to prepare for the conversation?

Taking time to prepare for the conversation can help to make it easier

Take the time to reflect, are you in the best frame of mind to be having this conversation with your teenager?

Choose a time and place where you both feel comfortable and will not be interrupted. Sometimes side-by-side situations such as driving or walking can be less daunting for your teenager

Be prepared for a range of reactions and don't expect too much from the initial chat

Be realistic – you won't be able to offer all the answers but simply listening to your teen is a good starting point

What can I do to prepare for the conversation?

First, reflect on your own feelings towards weight

If you have struggled with your own weight, there may be a chance that you feel uncomfortable talking about your teen's weight as you feel you are somehow not 'qualified' to do this. Don't be put off – you can work together to plan a way forward for both of you.

Be clear about your own attitude towards weight. You may be affected by weight bias – negative attitudes that affect how you react to people who live with overweight or obesity.

The conversation may be difficult for you as well as your teenager. You may experience all sorts of emotions, including anxiety, guilt or anger if your teen won't talk to you or becomes angry.

Be prepared to be surprised – you may have made assumptions about how your teen feels or why they are behaving in a certain way but the reality may be very different.



What can I do to prepare for the conversation?

Find or create a place where you both feel comfortable to talk openly



- Create a 'safe' environment, where you won't be disturbed and where you both feel comfortable
- Sometimes it is easier to have a conversation when you are side-by-side rather than face-to-face – for example while walking, driving or cooking
- Sometimes a TV programme or advert that you are watching together can provide a natural way into a chat about weight
- Avoid stressful periods such as exam times – school holidays may be a good time for your teenager

What can I do to prepare for the conversation?

It is important to not expect too much from the conversation

In some cases, this may be the first time your teen has talked about their weight and they may find it very difficult at first. **Your teen may react in a number of different ways** - with anger, embarrassment, blame or a complete refusal to discuss the matter.

Don't expect too much from the first chat - focus on small steps. The important thing is that you have opened up the discussion and can return to it in the future, when your teen feels ready to.

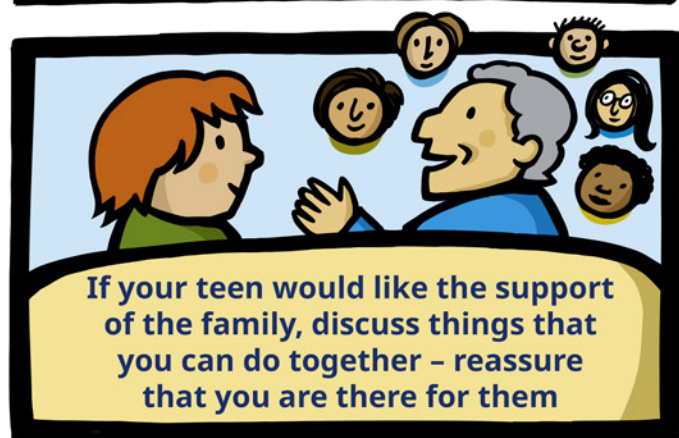
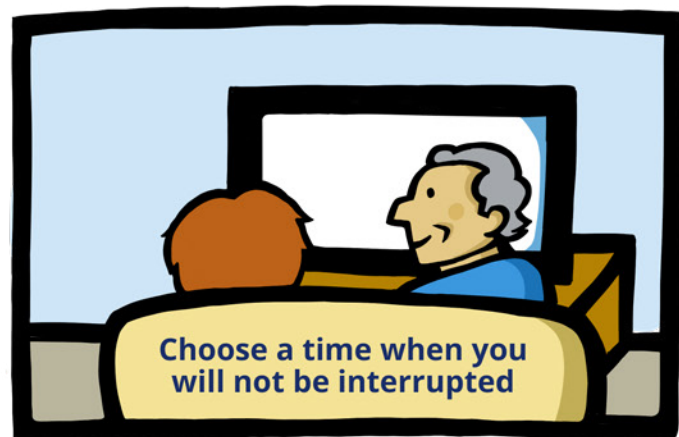
All teenagers are different and some find it easier to talk about feelings than others



What can I do to prepare for the conversation?

Example scenario 2:

You start a positive conversation about weight



How can I make sure I use the best language?



Words are very powerful. They can soothe a tense situation or make a stressful situation worse.

Let's take a look at what you could say and how you could say it and provide suggestions on how to deal with conflict.

How can I make sure I use the best language?

Take the time to understand your teen,
to help keep the tone positive

**Think about
language
that you can use
to be natural
yet positive**

**Listen carefully and
allow plenty of time
for them to reply
to your questions**

**Try to avoid any
negative words –
check with your teen
if there are words
they prefer to avoid**

**If the conversation
becomes heated, ask
if your teen would
like to end the
discussion and talk
again in the future**

Look out for cues in the conversation that could help you know whether it's a good time to pause it

- As you talk, ask your teen if they are happy to continue the discussion. Check their body language – if they are turning away, or refusing to look at you in the face, they may be finding it difficult
- If they have negative feelings about their weight, you may want to understand where these come from – it is from friends or social media? Has somebody made a comment about their weight? Have they been bullied? Are they comparing themselves to others in a negative way?
- Your teen may need prompting to share how they are feeling. Listen carefully to what they are saying and leave plenty of time for them to react to questions. Don't push them too hard – it might be better to return to the conversation on another day
- If your teen opens up about their emotions, let them know that you are pleased that they are sharing their feelings

Try to be aware of specific words that could be negative for your teen. Ask them if they would prefer you to avoid words such as 'weight' or 'obesity'. Some may prefer you to talk about their body (e.g. muscularity), rather than focusing on weight



How can I make sure I use the best language?

Sometimes, ending a conversation is best for your teenager

If the conversation become too heated, or your teen becomes upset, agree to end the discussion - "I can see you are upset. Would you prefer to talk about this another time."

Even if the conversation becomes angry or you feel you're not getting through, don't despair. You have raised the subject of weight and you can return to it at a later stage.

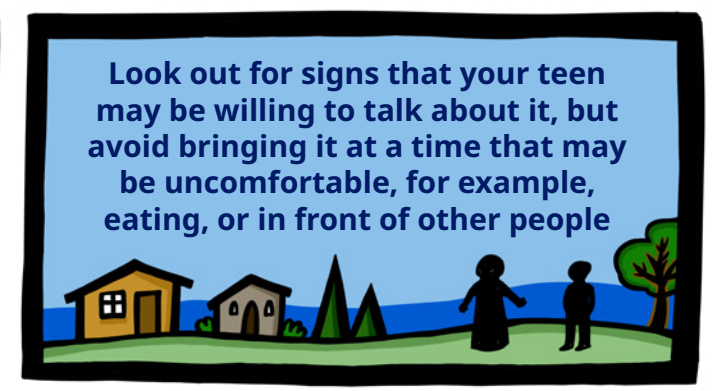
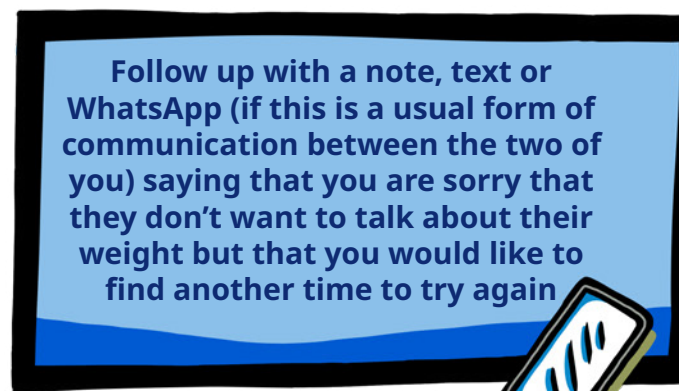
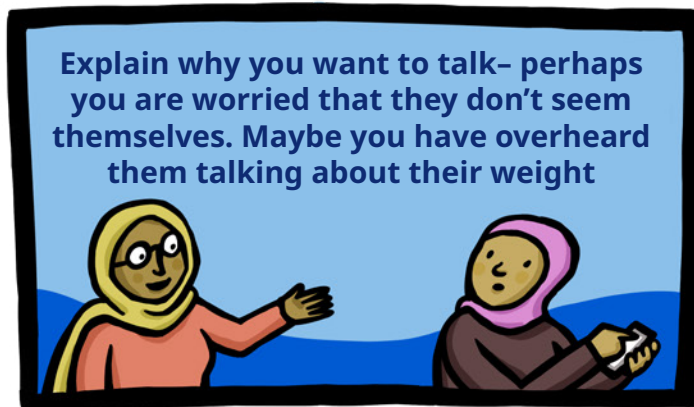
There may be other factors that are causing your teen to feel stressed, such as problems at school or college. Sometimes it is sensible to 'park' the subject and return to it a few weeks or months later.

Make it clear you are there to help at any time.



Example scenario 3:

How to keep the conversation positive when your teen doesn't want to talk about weight



How to talk to teens about weight

Should I talk to my teen about weight?

- It is okay to want to talk to your teen about weight
- Teens often want to lose weight but do so unsupported
- Conversations about weight can help to change your child's future

What can I do to prepare for the conversation?

- Taking time to prepare for the conversation can help to make it easier
- First, reflect on your own feelings towards weight
- Find or create a place where you both feel comfortable to talk openly
- It is important to not expect too much from the conversation

How can I make sure I use the best language?

- Take the time to understand your teen, to help keep the tone positive
- Look out for cues in the conversation that could help you know whether it's a good time to pause it
- Sometimes, ending a conversation is best for your teenager



Sources for further information about obesity

The following organisations offer support and information for people living with obesity and their caregivers.

- European Coalition for People Living with Obesity: <https://euroobesity.org/>
- Obesity UK: <https://www.obesityuk.org.uk/support-groups>
- World Obesity: <https://www.worldobesity.org/patient-portal>
- Obesity Action Coalition: <https://www.obesityaction.org/>
- All About Obesity: <https://allaboutobesity.org/>

If you are looking for further information about weight, visit [Truth About Weight](#)

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