

Healthy Weight and Autism: Support Team Considerations

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Risk Factors and Potential Barriers to Healthy Weight for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- Genetics/Family Health History
- Comorbid health conditions that contribute to weight gain (Hypothyroidism, Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, Depression, Obstructive Sleep Apnea, physical disability)
- Less time engaged in activity – sedentary lifestyle
- Sleep Disturbances
- Narrow range of interests that do not include physical fitness and health promoting habits
- Executive Functioning – Difficulty in organizing, planning, and executing daily health promoting activities
- Social Isolation – may be less likely to join in typical social activities that promote physical activity and fitness (For example, team sports or working out with friends)
 - May find it anxiety producing and overwhelming to attend a large gym
- Sensory Differences
 - Interoception – Body awareness, internal body cues and emotion
 - Difficulty identifying feelings of fullness
 - Difficulty identifying hunger vs. thirst vs. boredom vs. anxiety
 - Difficulty during exercise and exerting - understanding strengths and limitations, feeling safe while sweating and getting out of breath
 - Narrow range of food options due to sensitivity to taste, texture, and smell
 - Also need for routine and familiar – for example fast food or packaged food is consistent and predictable
- Medications that cause weight gain (antipsychotics, for example)
- OCD/Eating Disorders/Anorexia can also be common for Adults with ASD

Further Reading: *Risk Factors for Unhealthy Weight Gain and Obesity among Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder*

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6650879/#B4-ijms-20-03285>

Prevalence of Unhealthy Weight Categories for Autistic Adults

“Autistic adults are more likely to be in all weight categories considered ‘unhealthy’, i.e., underweight, overweight, and obese, than they are to be in the healthy weight category.”

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7256089/>

Prevalence of Unhealthy Weight of US Adolescents with Autism

“Researchers from CDC and the Health Resources and Services Administration found that obesity is high among adolescents with learning and behavioral developmental disabilities and highest among children with autism compared to adolescents without these conditions. This puts these already vulnerable adolescents at risk for lifelong health conditions related to being obese.”

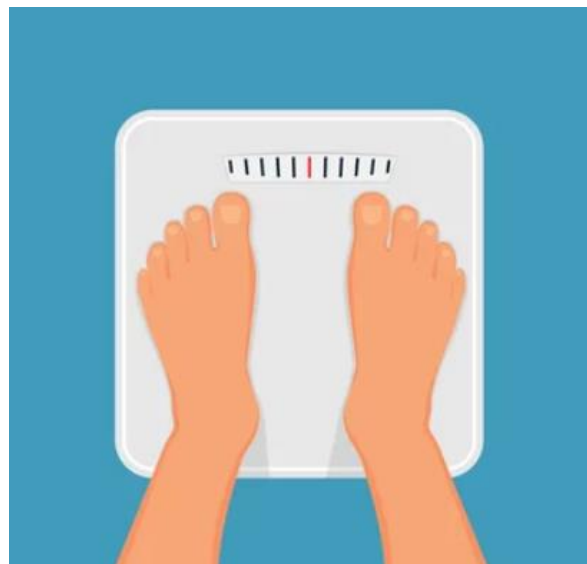
Adolescents with learning and behavioral developmental disabilities were about 1.5 times more likely to be obese than adolescents without developmental disabilities.

Adolescents with autism were about 2 times more likely to be obese than adolescents without developmental disabilities.”

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/features/keyfindings-unhealthy-weight.html>

“Autistic adults, and particularly autistic females, exhibit unhealthy diet, exercise, and sleep patterns; they are also more likely to be underweight or obese.”

<https://molecularautism.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13229-021-00441-x>



Consider these steps for supporting a participant working towards a healthy weight:

Step One – Identify Baseline Data:

- **Weight Trending**
 - Current Weight
 - Body Mass Index (BMI)
 - Trends over last 6-12 months
 - Recent Gain or Loss?
- **Food Intake**
 - Food Journal/Diary
 - Meals, snacks, drinks
 - Include amount/portions
- **Activity Level**
 - Type, Frequency, Length of time spent
- **Medical Data**
 - Resting heart rate
 - Blood pressure (baseline and any trending increase)
 - Bloodwork: Lipid Panel, Liver Function, Metabolic Panel, Glucose/A1C



Step Two – Establish Goals

- **Goals should be SMART** – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-Bound
- Receive input from health care professionals regarding recommendations and goals
- Input and buy-in from PARTICIPANT is paramount
- Short-term and long-term goals
- Should take into account current diagnoses or health conditions (mental and physical) that may impact healthy weight goals

Step Three – Create a Plan of Action

- Should be person-centered and specific
- Should involve health care professionals when possible and appropriate
- Should focus on small, attainable goals that add up over time
- Consider potential barriers to success
- Build plenty of support and “scaffolding” into the plan – the devil is in the details
- Plan should involve tracking, accountability, and regular “check-ins”

Step Four – Implement Plan and Continually Evaluate Progress

- Use baseline data to track progress over time
- Regularly evaluate progress – barriers and successes
- Reevaluate goals and modify plans depending on feedback from the participant, health care providers, and KAS Team.

Considerations for Supports Coordination (Health Care Professionals)

- Primary Care Physician
- Registered Dietician
- Endocrinologist
- Diabetic Educator
- Health Coach
- Therapist
- Gym Membership
- Personal Trainer

Considerations for Supporting Good Nutrition

- Food Journal or Nutrition Tracking apps
- Cooking Classes (virtual or in person)
- Sharing Recipes with Friends
- Creating a Cookbook
- Using social media for healthy cooking ideas (Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube)
- Free Nutrition Courses (Giant for example) <https://giantfood.com/pages/health-and-wellness-classes>
- Premade Meal Plans such as *Hello Fresh*, *Trifecta*, *Freshly*, etc. (dependent on cost vs. benefit)



Consider Tech Solutions

- Analog or Smart Scale
- Fitness Tracker Device (Fitbit, Samsung Galaxy Fit, Apple Watch, Whoop, etc.)
 - Steps (possible step goal per day)
 - Workouts
 - Heartrate
 - Sleep Quality
- Apps To Track (Some Free, Some at a cost)
 - MyFitnessPal
 - Calorie Counter App
 - Noom
 - Couch to 5K
 - Apple iPhone Activity App
 - Cronometer – Calorie Tracker
 - Calorie Counter – MyNetDiary
- YouTube - workout videos (endless options)



Skill Building and Task Analysis

Always assess skill levels. Never assume a participant has the skills they need to be successful in their weight loss, fitness, and health-related goals.

- Meal Planning
- Shop for nutritious food (online or in person)
- Storing fresh food so it does not spoil (batch cooking, buying frozen items, how to keep food fresh for as long as possible)
- Cooking at home
- How to make healthy choices when eating out
- Best clothing to exercise in (comfortable, good shoes, weather appropriate)
- What to do at the gym – weightlifting vs. cardio vs. fitness classes
- Work outs to do at home or outside
- Stretching and warming up – preventing injury

**Additional helpful resource Toolkits can be found on the SharePoint →
Keystone Autism Services → Health Services Page**

<https://keystonehumanservicesorg.sharepoint.com/sites/KAS2/Health%20Services/Forms/AllItems.aspx>

