

# Chronic Diseases of Children

Children often have acute, short-term illnesses such as upper respiratory tract or ear infections, gastrointestinal illness with vomiting and diarrhea, or injury-related problems. However, some children develop **chronic illness** (lasting for years or even lifelong) as a result of **genetic** (inherited) conditions, environmental factors, or a combination of both. Because **prenatal** (before birth) exposure to tobacco smoke, alcohol, and other toxins can affect a baby's health, it is important to extend environmental and nutritional concerns to women who may become pregnant. The June 27, 2007, issue of *JAMA* is a theme issue about chronic diseases of children.

## COMMON CHRONIC CHILDHOOD DISEASES

- Asthma—the number of children with asthma increases each year. Better treatment for asthma reduces the chance of hospitalization, need for emergency treatment, and death due to asthma.
- Cystic fibrosis—an inherited lung disease for which there is no cure. Early (even prenatal) diagnosis can lead to better treatment for children with cystic fibrosis.
- Diabetes—Having diabetes (either type 1 or type 2) causes increased risk of heart and blood vessel disease, stroke, and diabetes-related complications at an early age.
- Obesity and overweight in children is a major public health problem. More children are overweight, obese, or morbidly obese than ever before. Many children who are overweight maintain their obesity as adults, leading to obesity-related complications such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, stroke, some cancers, arthritis, and sleep-disordered breathing.
- Malnutrition—poor nutrition leads to **anemia** (low blood count), inadequate immune system function, and susceptibility to illness and intellectual development problems.
- Developmental disabilities, including attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and the autism spectrum disorders
- Cerebral palsy
- Consequences of low birth weight and prematurity, including chronic lung disease, **retinopathy of prematurity** (an eye disorder causing low vision or blindness), and developmental delays
- Mental illnesses—early diagnosis and treatment is important to decrease effects on development.

## PREVENTION

- Ensure early and comprehensive prenatal nutrition and health care.
- Encourage healthy eating habits beginning at an early age.
- Incorporate physical activity into daily life when children are young to prevent the sedentary lifestyle associated with obesity.
- Enable early diagnosis of developmental delays or mental illness to improve access to programs designed to help children with these conditions.

Regular medical care is important for all children to increase the chance that a chronic disease is diagnosed and treated early, lessening the overall impact on the child and family.

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- American Academy of Pediatrics  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development  
[www.nichd.nih.gov](http://www.nichd.nih.gov)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

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Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics; World Health Organization; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



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