- Child development

On the right track

Why it’s important for parents to understand growth charts and percentiles.

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WHEN you go to the paediatrician for a well-child check, you'll always review your baby's or child's growth together. One of the most important parts of a well-child checkup is the review of a child's growth.

Growth can be a reflection of a child's overall health and nutrition. It can also help identify underlying medical conditions. So, it's important to understand what your doctor or nurse practitioner says about your child's growth.

In the first two years, paediatricians use one growth chart that looks at a child's head circumference (a measurement of the widest part of their head), as well as their weight and length. We watch for changes in the size of head circumference in infancy because we want to know that the brain is growing.

What we want from a growth chart is to map out the growth trend for children.

Unlike school grades where we strive to score as high as possible, for growth we hope for consistency. When your child comes in at the 10th percentile, it's really no better or worse than coming in at the 90th.

What we care about most is the trend at which your baby or child gains weight, height or head circumference.

From toddlerhood onwards

After age two, you can use the same growth chart to track your child's growth until they're 20 years old.

In addition to weight and height, we also look at body mass index (BMI). BMI helps show whether a child's weight is a healthy match for their height and indicates if they are at risk for becoming overweight and the health complications that come from that.

A variety of factors, including genetics, environment, nutrition, activity and health problems can influence how your child grows.

Parents, paediatricians and nurses have been using growth charts since the late 1970s to track growth in infants and children. The charts were revised in 2000, when research showed that data for the first charts didn't accurately reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of our communities.

It is important to review your baby's or child's growth frequently so that you and your paediatrician can identify any changes to the trend.

Often, simple steps can be taken to help ensure your child's ongoing healthy growth.

When you're looking at a growth chart, focus on how your child is changing over time. One static point on the growth chart isn't as useful as evaluating five data points over time.

As you follow your child's growth chart along from infancy into toddlerhood, you'll notice frequent changes.

As your child gets older, these changes may happen less often.

It is the rate and trend in your child's growth that is important, rather than the specific number.

Additional information

Understanding growth charts and all the different aspects of your child's health that factor into them can be difficult.

Ask your paediatrician, family doctor or nurse practitioner to help you understand if you have questions.

If your doctor doesn't have a computer in the examination room, ask to see the growth chart on paper or on a screen in the office.

Many parents find it exciting to look back and see how much their child has grown since the last visit.

The human body is pretty amazing – your baby will double their weight by about six months and triple it by around one year.

At times, your paediatrician may use additional information and charts to help them understand your child's weight and growth over time.

In particular, the doctor may use extra information when your child's measurements fall above or below the percentile curves on the growth charts.

Z-scores may be part of the additional information used by your paediatrician.

Z-scores allow paediatricians to understand and compare children's weights even when they are above or below the percentile growth curves.

If you have a challenge understanding how your child is growing or how the growth chart is presented, keep asking for clarification.

It's OK if you don't understand the presentation of facts on these charts, but have confidence to speak up and ask the doctor or nurse practitioner to explain it. – American Academy of Pediatrics/Tribune News Service

Dr Nicole Anania served as the Implementation Scientist on the American Academy of Pediatrics Faltering Weight Clinical Practice Guideline. Most recently, she was a Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Kentucky and Medical Director for Inpatient Pediatrics at Med Center Health in Bowling Green, Kentucky in the US. Prior to that, she served as a Master Clinician and Director of Quality Improvement for the Outreach Division of Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago and has extensive experience working with children with medical complexity and faltering weight.

This visual is human-created, AI-aided

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