

What to Expect with Growing Swimmers and Their Changing Bodies

Even though swimmers get plenty of exercise, questions about their growth still linger. Is my swimmer growing normally? Why is he slow to develop? Is she filling out too early? When parents and swimmers know what to expect with growth, it can calm unnecessary fears and divert potentially harmful interventions.

Here, I address some common concerns about body weight in growing swimmers:

“My daughter has a little ‘extra’ around the middle. She’s active and seems to eat well—and thankfully she’s not worried about it, but I’m a little concerned.”

In girls, the body prepares for the important job of menstruation by laying down body fat in the area of the tummy. Sometimes this is interpreted as abnormal weight gain, but for most healthy children, this is normal.

The average age of menses (onset of period) is 12.5 years, but this varies with ethnicity and weight status, and can be earlier or later. Once puberty starts (usually around age 10), height growth takes off and girls magically thin out. Once height reaches its peak, body weight is redistributed to the rear, hips, breasts, backs of arms, and thighs, transforming the body into a curvy womanly figure. If you notice extra weight gain overall, more than the normal tummy trend and “filling out” of puberty, it may be an indicator of overweight or obesity.

“My son seems to be the smallest in the class. All the girls are taller than he is, and he doesn’t seem to be getting muscular.”

In general, girls and boys grow at very different rates. Girls outpace boys early on, then boys catch up and surpass girls during later adolescence. Boys generally lag behind girls, starting puberty about 2 years later (around age 12).

Not only do boys get their turn, it lasts longer. Boys end up taller and more muscular than girls. Once puberty hits, testosterone levels rise and visible muscle growth occurs.

“My daughter seems to be losing weight. Should I be concerned?”

Growing swimmers are just that—growing. In other words, they are meant to gain weight and stature until age 16 (girls) or 18 (boys) on average. If your swimmer is losing weight, he or she may not be eating enough to balance the energy expenditure associated with swimming. Over time, lack of weight gain can result in stunted stature (limited height growth).

“I think my son is gaining too much weight.”

The best way to determine whether your swimmer is on target with growth is to check his growth chart with the pediatrician. Normal growth follows a typical trend or growth channel throughout childhood. If weight increases from the usual growth pattern, this indicates that excess weight gain is occurring. The good news is that swimming is a calorie-burning sport. Make sure swimmers are eating a healthy balance of foods and scale back on sweets, sodas and high-fat snack foods.

Bottom Line: Know what to expect with your swimmers growth. Boys and girls grow and deposit muscle and fat tissue differently and their overall timing is different. Growth is a gradual acceleration in weight and height, and weight loss is not normal. Know when weight gain is getting out of hand by checking growth periodically.

Knowing these normal growth trends can help promote a healthy weight and avoid potentially negative interventions, like putting a little girl with a belly on a diet, pushing protein in young boys for bigger muscles, or ignoring slowed growth or too much weight gain.