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Nearly 1 in 3 Children Now Faces Chronic Health Conditions

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | November 12, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Nearly 1 in 3 children in the United States now live with a chronic health condition or functional limitation, and many of these conditions follow them into adulthood
- Asthma, ADHD, autism, and prediabetes have risen steadily over the past two decades, which can make it harder for children to succeed in school and life
- Children from low-income families face a higher risk, with poverty, public insurance, and parental unemployment all linked to a higher prevalence of chronic health problems
- Environmental toxins, poor diet, and stress are thought to be important contributors to these conditions
- Early detection and prevention through clean eating, better sleep, sunlight, and stress management may help protect your child's future

Researchers have documented a dramatic rise in pediatric-onset chronic conditions over the last two decades. The most common examples include asthma, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and prediabetes — which can progress to full diabetes over time, raising the risk of heart disease, nerve damage, and kidney failure. In the United States, nearly 1 in 3 children are living with a chronic condition or functional limitation.

If you think this issue only impacts their childhood, think again. Many children do not outgrow these health challenges, but instead carry them into adulthood.

Chronic Health Conditions in Kids Are Rising Faster Than You Think

A study — a secondary analysis of nationally representative survey data — published in Academic Pediatrics examined how chronic health conditions in children and young adults have changed in the United States from 1999 to 2018. Conducted by researchers from University of California, Los Angeles' (UCLA) David Geffen School of Medicine and Harvard Medical School, the study focused on conditions that begin in childhood and continue into adulthood.

Their goal was to show how big the problem has become, which conditions are rising the fastest, and how these health burdens affect both children and society at large.[1]

- **Researchers studied a large, diverse group across the country —** The study included a nationally representative sample of 236,412 individuals between ages 5 and 25. The data was from the 1999 to 2018 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS).

  According to News-Medical.Net, the researchers "estimated the annual average increase in chronic conditions (CC) and functional limitations (FL) over time." Because these conditions were self-reported by participants or a caregiver, the estimates are subject to recall bias — a limitation that the researchers acknowledged.[2]

- **Nearly 1 in 3 children had a chronic condition or functional limitation by 2018 —** The researchers found that the frequency of chronic conditions or functional limitations among children ages 5 to 17 years increased from about 23% in 1999/2000 to over 30% by 2017/2018. Even more concerning, the study estimated that 1.2 million young people with chronic conditions or functional limitations are now entering adulthood each year, carrying these challenges into college, work, and adult life.

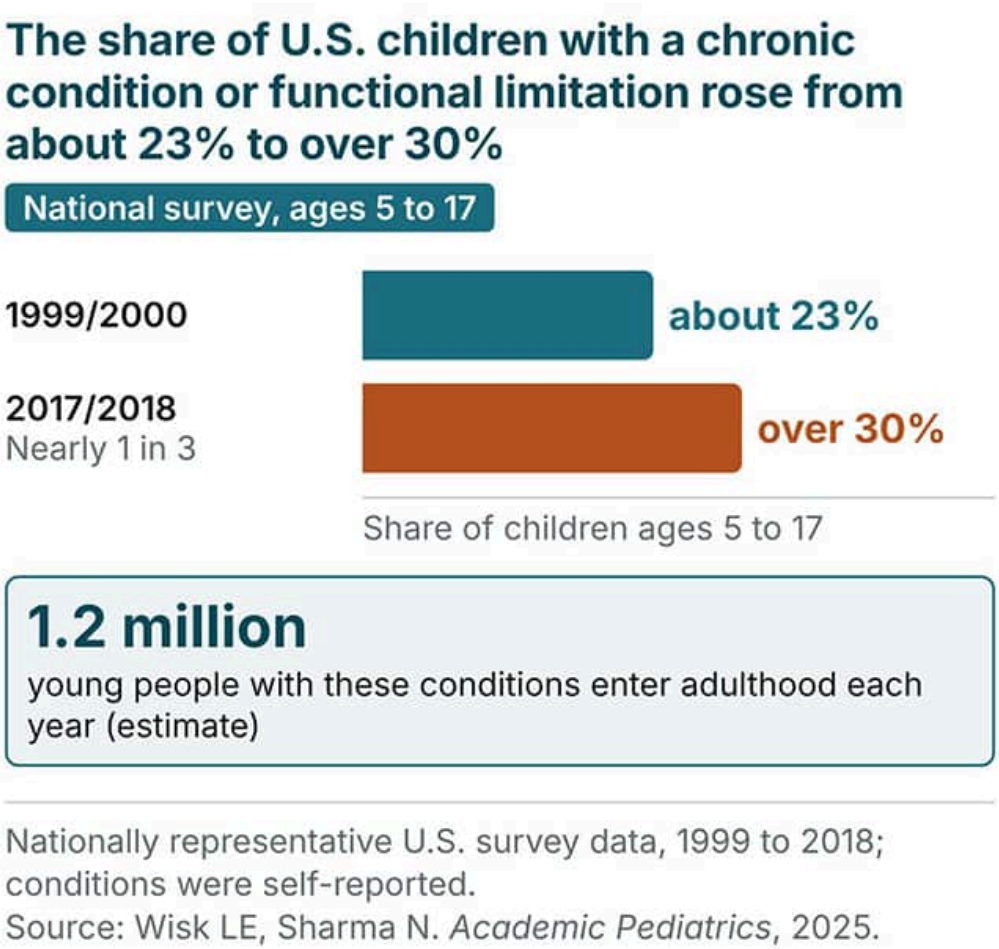


Figure 1. *The share of U.S. children ages 5 to 17 with a chronic condition or functional limitation rose from about 23% in 1999/2000 to over 30% by 2017/2018.*

- **Asthma, ADHD, autism, and prediabetes are leading the increase —** Asthma, ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder), autism, and prediabetes are the top drivers of this growing problem. Specifically, ADHD, autism, and asthma among children, and asthma, seizures, and prediabetes among young adults. These conditions can interfere with learning, playing, and building relationships.

- **The numbers show steady and consistent growth —** According to their findings, ADHD rates among children jumped by 0.24 percentage points per year, while autism diagnoses went up by 0.13 percentage points annually. Asthma cases climbed by 0.12 percentage points per year, and prediabetes in young adults rose by 0.12 percentage points annually.

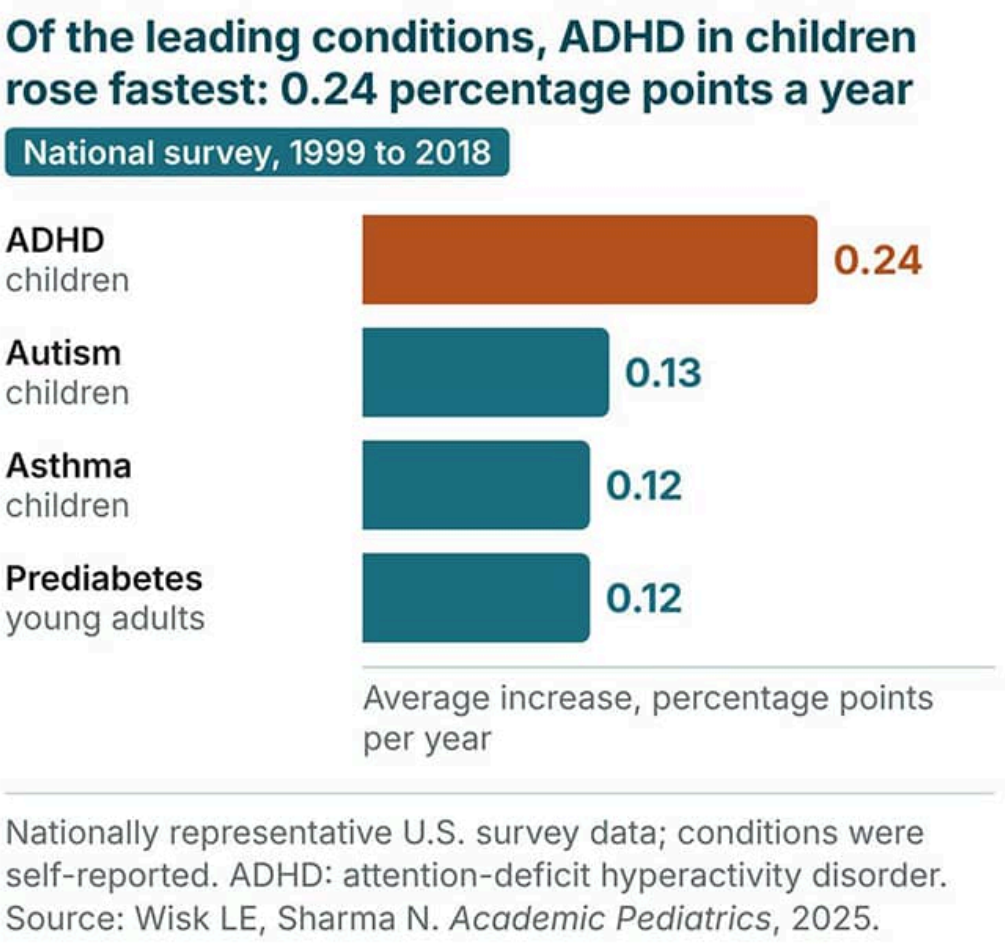


Figure 2. *ADHD among children rose by 0.24 percentage points a year, autism by 0.13, and asthma by 0.12. Meanwhile, prediabetes in young adults rose by 0.12.*

While these yearly changes seem small, they build up to substantial increases over time. If you have children, this means their schools, sports programs, and healthcare providers are dealing with far more chronic conditions than ever before — and they may not be ready to handle it well.

Low-Income Families Are Being Hit the Hardest

The study found clear inequalities among the children who develop chronic conditions. In particular, less-privileged children are more likely to live with these conditions.[3]

- **Children from families earning below the poverty line are more often affected —** These children had a 3.39 percentage point higher adjusted prevalence of chronic conditions or functional limitations than children from the highest-income families. Children on public insurance had an 8.63 percentage point higher prevalence compared to those with private insurance.

- **Poverty and lack of stable employment are linked to poorer health outcomes —** Children with unemployed parents had a 7.65 percentage point higher rate of chronic conditions. Because this was a cross-sectional analysis, it shows an association rather than proof that financial hardship causes these conditions, but the pattern is consistent across income, insurance, and employment.

  If you're facing financial stress, your children may be at greater risk, not just because of genetics, but possibly also because of barriers to care and nutrition.

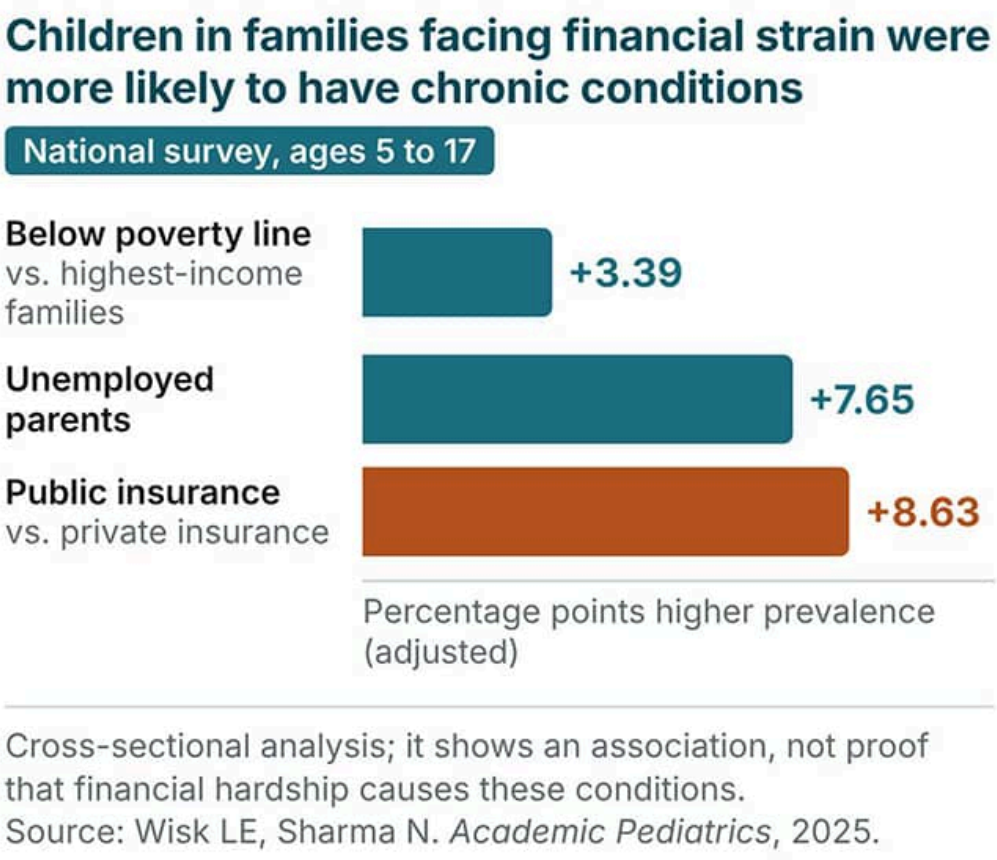


Figure 3. *Children below the poverty line, with unemployed parents, or on public insurance, had a higher adjusted prevalence of chronic conditions. Note that this is an association rather than proof of cause.*

- **These conditions can lead to physical, emotional, and educational limitations —** Children who struggle with these conditions may experience functional limitations such as speech problems, musculoskeletal problems, and emotional challenges like anxiety and depression. These issues can make it harder for kids to succeed in school, participate in physical activities, and build friendships.

As children age, these struggles can compound, contributing to lower job prospects and higher healthcare costs. This means parents can watch for early warning signs and work proactively to support their child's development and mental health.

What Are the Other Contributing Factors to Chronic Conditions in Children?

The authors noted that other factors may be affecting disease rates, such as regional differences. Their findings note that children in the Western U.S. had the lowest rates of chronic conditions or functional limitations, while rates in the Northeast, Midwest, and South were similar to one another. If you're in a high-risk area, it's worth taking extra steps to reduce environmental triggers and promote healthy habits.[4]

- **Poor diet, pollution, and stress are thought to be major contributors —** While the study didn't measure diet, pollution, or stress directly, the authors noted that the causes behind these rising conditions are many, involving a complex interaction of individual biology, community context and environment, and healthcare systems. Environmental exposures, chronic stress, and poor diet are widely considered to be part of that picture.

  For asthma, pollutants and allergens are common triggers. Prediabetes is closely linked to eating too many processed foods and not getting enough movement, which can lead to insulin resistance — where your body stops responding properly

to insulin, making blood sugar levels rise. ADHD and autism likely also have environmental and dietary factors involved.

- **Transitions to adult healthcare often fall short —** Children and young adults with chronic conditions often lose support when they age out of pediatric care. This makes managing their conditions harder, which can put them at risk of disengaging from care and experiencing flare-ups of their conditions. If you have a teenager with a chronic condition, it would be wise to help them plan and prepare for managing their health as adults.

- **Early detection and prevention are key to reducing the burden —** The researchers emphasized the importance of primary prevention in pediatric care, noting that many of the rising conditions, such as prediabetes and asthma, may be prevented or managed in primary care. Parents and pediatricians can work together to look for early signs like fatigue, changes in behavior, or physical symptoms like wheezing and weight gain.

Addressing these issues early may help limit long-term effects and support better outcomes. Lauren Wisk, Ph.D., assistant professor of medicine at UCLA, and the study's lead author, said:

> *"Most youth with chronic conditions need to access health and social services for the rest of their lives, but our health system is not set up to successfully move young people from pediatric to adult focused care and so many of these youth are at risk of disengaging with care and experiencing disease exacerbations.*
>
> *We should invest in assisting these youth in engaging appropriately with healthcare across their lifespan in order to protect their health and well-being, and to facilitate their maximum participation in society with respect to education, vocation, social groups, and community spaces."*[5]

What's Triggering the Rising Autism and ADHD Rates?

According to Autism Parenting Magazine, about 1 in 36 children are now diagnosed with autism — that's roughly 317% higher compared to autism rates in 2000.[6] As for ADHD, approximately 6% of youth and 2.5% of adults are affected globally. The rise in these disorders is concerning, with evidence pointing to gene-environment interactions as key contributors to their development.[7]

- **The causes of autism are complex —** There are both genetic and environmental factors involved. One factor under investigation is parental chemical intolerance, which is often linked to toxicant-induced loss of tolerance (TILT), where exposure to certain chemicals leads to heightened sensitivity.

  In a 2024 population-based survey of U.S. adults, parents with chemical intolerance scores in the top 10% were 5.7 times as likely to report having a child with autism, and 2.1 times as likely to report a child with ADHD, as those in the bottom 10%. Note that this is an observational finding that the authors say needs confirmation in controlled studies.

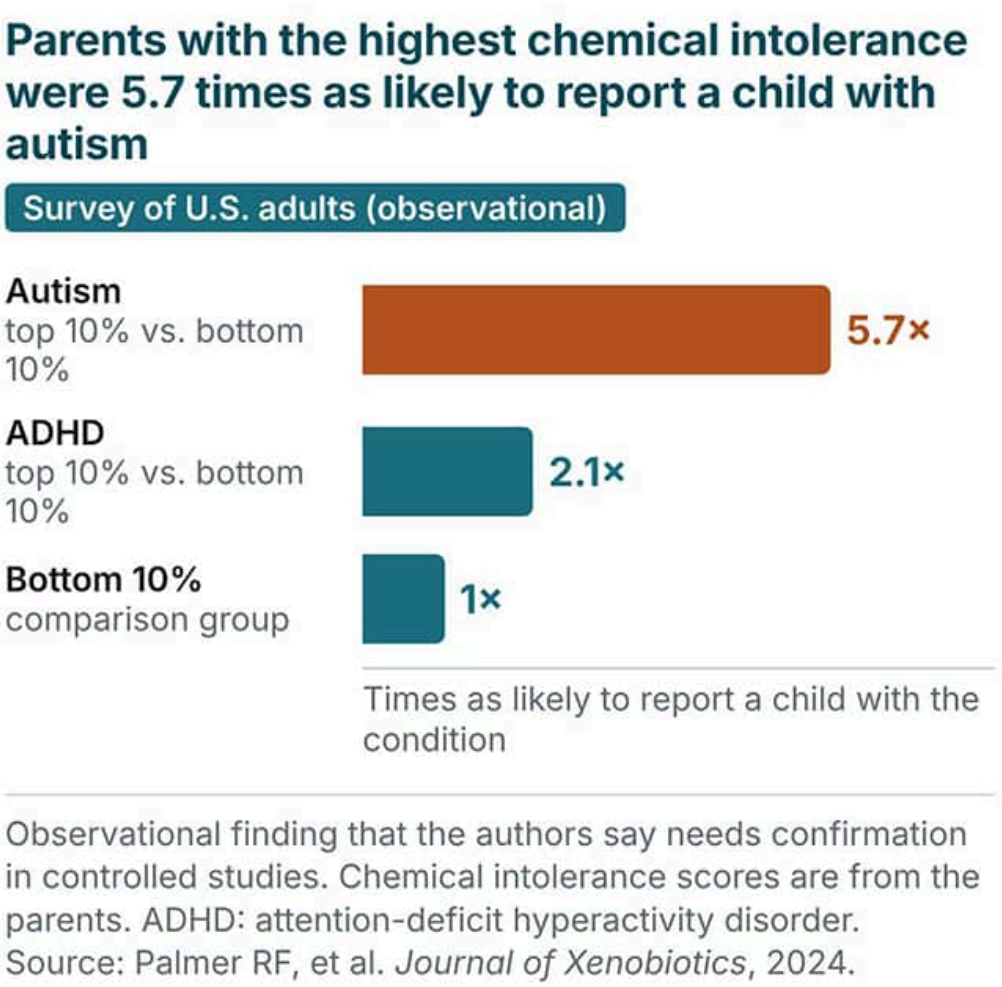


Figure 4. *In a survey of U.S. adults, parents with the highest chemical intolerance scores were 5.7 times as likely to report a child with autism, and 2.1 times as likely to report a child with ADHD.*

- **Pesticides, heavy metals, and other toxic chemicals have been linked to autism and ADHD —** According to a 2022 perspective article published in Pediatrics journal, which notes that several studies point in this direction:

  > *"[G]estational exposures to some neurotoxic and endocrine-disrupting pesticides, including organochlorines, organophosphates, and pyrethroids, increase the chances of an autism diagnosis or autism-related behaviors in children.*

Evidence is emerging that other toxic chemicals are associated with autism or autism-related behaviors, notably phthalates, ubiquitous chemicals that cause a decrease in testosterone."[8]

- **Poor gut health in early life is also another factor under study —** Researchers propose that this may disrupt brain development through the gut-brain axis. According to a prospective birth-cohort study of Swedish children published in the journal Cell, children later diagnosed with autism or ADHD tended to have lower levels of key gut bacteria in infancy, such as Akkermansia muciniphila, Bifidobacterium, and Faecalibacterium.

  These beneficial microbes are thought to play important roles in regulating inflammation and producing compounds, including neurotransmitter precursors, that support mood and brain function.[9]

- **Electromagnetic fields (EMFs) are another growing concern —** EMFs may activate voltage-gated calcium channels (VGCCs), which has been proposed to lead to oxidative stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, and inflammation in the brain.

  These effects may interfere with brain development, particularly in pregnant women and young children, whose developing nervous systems are especially sensitive to environmental stressors. To learn more about this, read "**The Invisible Risk Factor of Autism**."

- **Nutritional deficiencies often add to these challenges —** Diets loaded with processed foods, refined sugars, and inflammatory omega-6 fats like **linoleic acid (LA)** can deprive the body of nutrients critical for brain health. Poor nutrition not only may impair cognitive function, but may also amplify the impact of other environmental stressors, creating a compounding effect on brain development.

Childhood Obesity Is Now a Widespread Problem

Childhood obesity poses significant health risks, affecting children's physical and emotional well-being. It is associated with complications like insulin resistance, impaired glucose tolerance, and dyslipidemia. Severe childhood obesity, in particular, is strongly associated with prediabetes, high blood pressure, dyslipidemia, and early mortality.[10]

- **Hundreds of millions of children worldwide are now living with overweight or obesity —** According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 400 million children and adolescents ages 5 to 19 were overweight in 2024, including 170 million living with obesity. In the U.S., 1 in 5 children and adolescents are obese.[11]

  Among 2- to 19-year-olds, the prevalence of obesity was 19.7% from 2017 to March 2020, or 14.7 million individuals affected.[12] Early obesity is strongly predictive of obesity in later life, with 90% of children who develop obesity at age 3 still having obesity in adolescence.[13]

- **Childhood obesity raises the risk of physical and mental health conditions —** These include high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes, asthma, sleep apnea, joint problems, and gallbladder disease. It also takes a mental toll and is associated with an increased risk of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, social problems, and lower quality of life.

- **Four factors account for a large share of early childhood obesity —** A prospective cohort study of 5,734 children in New Zealand found that there are four primary factors that, when combined, account for nearly half (about 43%) of obesity cases in young children by age 4.5. These include lower food security during infancy, early exposure to screens and digital gadgets, not getting adequate sleep, and regular consumption of takeaway (fast) food and soft drinks.[14]



Figure 5. *In a New Zealand cohort of 5,734 children, four early-life factors combined accounted for about 43% of obesity cases by age 4.5.*

Part of the problem with addressing and resolving childhood obesity is that the nutritional guidance children and their parents get is flawed — the focus is on reducing saturated fats and other whole foods, while promoting industrial seed oils (often marketed as vegetable oils) and heavily processed, low-fat diets. This may contribute to a cascade of health problems rooted in mitochondrial dysfunction and insulin resistance. To learn more about this, read "Toddler Obesity Is on the Rise."

The Benefits of Breastfeeding Are Being Sidelined in Favor of Infant Formula

Another factor that may play a role in children's long-term health is how they are fed in infancy. Many parents bottle-feed their babies, which means missing out on the unique benefits of breast milk. Partly as a result of infant formula marketing, our current culture now views breastfeeding as a lifestyle choice rather than a biological norm.

- **Societal expectations undermine breastfeeding —** In the West, mothers often feel pressured to stop breastfeeding once their child turns 1 year old. It's often framed as inconvenient or unnecessary to breastfeed a baby once they reach this age. Furthermore, women who extend breastfeeding beyond a year are often seen as "weirdos" or overly attached.

- **Breast milk is called "liquid gold" for a reason —** Unlike formula, breast milk offers a unique blend of antibodies, immune factors, hormones, and stem cells that are thought to adapt to the needs of the child. It's dynamic, and research suggests it may adjust its composition in response to cues from the baby's saliva and feeding frequency.

- **Breastfeeding supports your child's immunity and cognitive health —** Breastfed infants tend to have better immune responses, lower risks of respiratory infections, and better cognitive development. Studies suggest that breastfed babies often score higher on IQ tests.[15]

- **It's also associated with a lower risk of being overweight and obese —** A cross-sectional study of more than 10,000 children and adolescents in China found that longer breastfeeding was linked to lower body mass index (BMI). In addition, children breastfed for more than 12 months had a lower risk of overweight and obesity.

  The authors suggest one reason is that breastfeeding allows solid foods to be delayed until about 6 months of age, and early introduction of solids has been linked to higher obesity risk.[16] Breastfeeding is also thought to help establish a healthy gut microbiome, which supports lifelong health.

- **Breastfeeding benefits mothers as well —** Research has linked breastfeeding to lower risks of postpartum depression, breast and ovarian cancers, and Type 2 diabetes in mothers, and some studies also link it to fewer osteoporosis-related hip fractures later in life. Breastfeeding is also instrumental in establishing a bond between mother and child.[17,18]

Breast milk is uniquely suited to an infant's nutritional needs, so if you are a new mother and still lactating, breastfeeding is an excellent choice for both you and your child and may help lower their risk of chronic health conditions later in life. If breastfeeding isn't possible for you, talk with a lactation consultant or your child's healthcare provider about the best alternatives. I also recommend reading "**The Power of Breastfeeding**" to learn more about the benefits of breastfeeding.

Fostering Healthy Habits Early in Life May Help Lower the Risk of Chronic Conditions

The chronic conditions covered by the featured study have been linked to poor diet, stress, pollution, and lack of access to healthy habits from the start. If you feel overwhelmed, don't be. There are strategies to help your child avoid becoming part of these statistics. I've put together five steps you can use right now to help reduce risk and support their long-term health.

1. **Clean up your child's diet and remove inflammatory foods —** Eliminate processed foods, seed oils, and anything made with high amounts of processed sugar. Start cooking simple meals at home with animal-based proteins, grass fed butter, ghee, root vegetables, white rice, and whole fruits. If your child has gut issues or food sensitivities, start with easily digestible carbs like white rice and whole fruits.

   Avoid store-bought sauces and packaged snacks that are filled with chemicals and hidden industrial fats. If you are not sure what's safe, use this rule — If it comes in a box with marketing on the front, don't buy it.

2. **Reduce exposure to environmental toxins —** If you live in a polluted city or near industrial areas, filter your indoor air. Avoid synthetic fragrances, candles, and harsh cleaning chemicals. Focus on using simple products — baking soda, vinegar, and natural soap goes a long way. If your child has asthma, this step is especially important — reducing environmental irritants may help ease the burden on their lungs, alongside the care plan from your child's doctor.

3. **Focus on sleep and stress management —** Children need structured sleep routines. Aim for 10 to 12 hours of sleep for younger kids and at least nine hours for teenagers. Reduce their screentime — gadgets should be turned off an hour before bed.

   If your child struggles with anxiety or behavioral issues, establish calming rituals like reading together, spending time outdoors, and cutting out high-sugar snacks that spike and crash energy levels. I recommend making sleep a family priority — it helps regulate hormones, may help lower cortisol, and gives their bodies time to recover.

4. **Prioritize safe movement and sunlight —** Allow your child to play and spend time outdoors, especially if they have behavioral or mood issues. Light exposure in the morning can support mood, circadian rhythm, and brain function.

   Walking, swimming, and gentle play help regulate energy, build strong muscles, and encourage healthy metabolism. Avoid over-scheduled lives packed with indoor screen time. Simpler routines with daily activity outdoors are a foundation for stable mental and physical health.

5. **Watch for early warning signs and act quickly —** If you notice weight gain, chronic fatigue, skin rashes, or changes in mood and focus, don't ignore them. These can be your child's body's warning signals. Address them early with your child's healthcare provider, along with diet changes, reducing toxins in your home environment, and restoring healthy sleep.

If your child has blood sugar issues or you suspect prediabetes, talk to your child's healthcare provider, cut processed carbs, and introduce balanced meals with protein and clean, easily digested carbs like white rice and whole fruits. Prevention is far easier than reversal, and you have control over these daily choices.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Chronic Health Conditions in Children

Q: Why are so many kids developing chronic health conditions?

A: Poor diet, stress, pollution, and lack of movement are thought to contribute to chronic conditions like asthma, ADHD, autism, and prediabetes. Kids today are exposed to processed foods, environmental toxins, and disrupted sleep, all of which may raise their risk early in life.

Q: What are early warning signs to watch for in my child?

A: Look out for weight gain, fatigue, mood changes, skin issues, frequent wheezing, and trouble focusing. These can be signals that your child's health needs attention, and are worth discussing with your child's healthcare provider.

Q: How does poverty affect my child's risk of chronic disease?

A: Children in low-income homes are more likely to live with chronic conditions, and likely contributors include poor nutrition, lack of safe environments, and limited access to healthcare. Stability and clean food can make a meaningful difference.

Q: What are the initial steps I can take to help protect my child's health?

A: Clean up your child's diet, reduce environmental toxins, make sleep and stress management a family priority, encourage daily sunlight and movement, and act on early symptoms.

Q: Why does prediabetes matter for kids?

A: Prediabetes can progress to full diabetes if it isn't addressed, which can put your child at risk for heart disease, nerve damage, and kidney failure. Nutritionally balanced, unprocessed meals, eliminating processed sugars, and active play are key tools that may help lower that risk.

This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a qualified healthcare provider before making changes to your health regimen.

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