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Canada discards U.S. growth charts for kids

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Four national health groups released a statement on Monday announcing the change in standards, which they say reflect how children should grow up to age five rather than how they actually grow.

The new standards for those aged five to 19 include WHO charts that aim to help identify those at risk of obesity by tracking body mass index or BMI, a tool used to determine a person's healthy weight range for their height.

"They are actually very helpful, particularly as children get close to puberty, because the timing of puberty varies from child to child," said Tanis Fenton, a spokeswoman for Dietitians of Canada and a registered dietician and epidemiologist in Calgary.

"And when you're evaluating the BMI then you're not just comparing their size to their age. So it can be quite helpful to use the BMI. And it'll be interesting to see how we all get used to using them."

Previous charts developed by the U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention were based on children who were not immunized or breastfed, were exposed to second-hand smoke, and included much higher incidences of overweight and obese children in the U.S.

The WHO standards looked at the growth of children in Brazil, Ghana, India, Norway, Oman and the United States, a better reflection of Canada's ethnic diversity, the groups said.

Besides the dietitians' group, the Canadian Paediatric Society, the College of Family Physicians of Canada and Community Health Nurses of Canada also collaborated on the project to adapt the WHO charts for Canada.

The groups' research showed breastfed babies grew slightly faster in the first six months compared with babies fed formula. After that, breastfed babies tend to gain weight a little more slowly, Fenton said, noting the charts are also suitable for infants fed formula.

Growing too quickly or too slowly can be a sign of possible problems with health or nutrition. Using standardized tools to monitor growth can help identify problems early to prevent serious problems, said Dr. Donna Secker, an author of the collaborative statement and a clinical dietician at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children.

The charts include metric and imperial measures, and are available in English and French.