



## Healthy Eating Habits

Childhood is the time to instill lifelong eating and exercise habits that contribute to good health. Nutrition affects children's ability to learn, develop and stay healthy throughout life.

Obesity is one of the most significant health problems facing Americans today. The number of seriously overweight children and adolescents has more than doubled in the last three decades. It is estimated that almost 30 percent of children and teens are overweight. An overweight adolescent has a 70 percent chance of becoming an obese adult. Obesity also puts children at a higher risk for life threatening health problems such as high blood pressure, premature heart attacks and diabetes. Obesity in childhood often leads to a lifetime of poor eating habits and low self-esteem.

### Common Misconceptions

#### **Eat everything on your plate**

Forcing kids to always finish everything on their plate is not a productive way to encourage healthy eating. In fact, it prohibits children from listening to their inner hunger cues and fails to allow the appetite to control the quantity of food eaten. Children then over eat to please parents, avoid punishment, or get away from the table.

#### **No sweets policy**

Children will get their hands on sweets; denying access to them at all times will only make your kids more obsessive about eating them. Instead, allow your child to choose one sweet food item each time you shop. This will lessen the appeal.

#### **Sugar makes kids hyper**

Contrary to popular belief, sugar does not cause hyperactivity, but it can contribute to excess weight gain and tooth decay. Foods that are high in sugar tend to also be high in calories and fat, but low in valuable nutrients. If you notice significant changes in your child's mood or behavior after consuming sugary foods it may be related to food additives, allergies or caffeine. Check with your doctor.



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## Meal-Planning Basics

- ✓ Sharing meals together is an important part of family life. It provides some structure to a busy day and gives families an opportunity to listen and support each other everyday.
- ✓ Be a good role model: Children reflect parents' actions and attitudes toward most things, including food. It is important to try new foods and new ways for preparing them. Involve your children in food preparation.
- ✓ Buy a variety of healthy foods, including fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain breads and cereals.
- ✓ Set specific times for meals and snacks.
- ✓ Limit sugary-high fat snacks.
- ✓ Encourage children to drink plenty of water or milk, not empty-calorie fruit drinks and sodas.
- ✓ Avoid adding excessive salt to foods.
- ✓ Be a planner: Most young children need a snack or two in addition to regular meals. Plan snacks so your child eats every two to three hours. Use the Food Guide Pyramid for meals and snacks.
- ✓ Be adventurous: Have a "new food night" each week. Include your child in choosing the new food to try.
- ✓ Be creative: Try shredding fruits and vegetables and adding them to pancakes, muffins or hamburger. Encourage your child to invent new snacks or sandwiches from healthful ingredients. Use color, texture, size and variety when thinking up new food ideas.

Help your children understand why some foods are better than others. For example, junk foods have little nutritional value but are usually high in calories, fat, sodium, sugar, and preservatives. Junk food fills you up so that you don't feel like eating more nutritionally balanced meals.

Peer pressure often compels children to make poor food choices. Help children understand the importance of proper nutrition by focusing on rewards that are important to them. When kids give their bodies the proper fuel, they are able to think more clearly, perform better in school, in athletics and control acne.

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