



Children's Hospital Boston Preventive Cardiology

Partnership: The Key to Your Teen Eating Healthy

Have you been trying to get your teenager to eat healthy, only to find that you're driving yourself crazy and eroding your relationship with your child? You're not alone in thinking that your efforts are futile! Teenagers love their autonomy. Nutrition is just another part of their lives that they like to make independent choices about. The more you focus on nutrition issues that they are not implementing; the more they will go the opposite way of your wishes. Parents can do only so much to influence their child's food choices. The sooner parents realize this; the sooner productive dialogue can begin about their child's nutrition.

After all, high-quality teen nutrition is a shared responsibility between parent and child. Providing your child with a wide selection of healthy foods and encouraging them (not berating them) to try a variety of foods is a good first step. Providing nutrition education to a teenager in a constructive way can make a bigger impact than criticizing their choices on a daily basis. Showing an understanding and acceptance of their food choices shows your respect of their growing ability to make decisions. Giving your child the chance to make his own food choices allows for him to weave independence with awareness and knowledge.

So what are the important issues for healthy teen nutrition that you can begin to constructively introduce with your teenager over time?

Plant Power:

Most teens don't eat enough fruits and vegs. Only one in five children consume five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day. Eating sufficient fruits and vegetables each day is important for long-term health since they contain nutrients that most other foods groups don't have. These nutrients, including antioxidants and phytochemicals, fight battles against heart disease and cancer everyday but most people don't know these battles are even happening. If there is a shortage of these nutrients in the body due to a poor intake of fruits and vegetables, then the body doesn't have enough armies to fight against these chronic diseases that are threatening the body even at a young age. Remember heart disease can start when people are young and worsen through adulthood. **BOTTOMLINE:** *Teens should strive to eat at least 5 fruits and vegetables combined. Five fruits and vegetables is equal to 1 cup of grapes with breakfast, 2 cups of salad with an apple at lunch and a ½ cup of steamed broccoli with dinner.*

Boning up on Calcium:

This nutrient is very important for life long bone health since the teenage years is the last chance to fill the bones with as much calcium as possible. A poor calcium intake during teen years could lead to weaker bones throughout life and increase the risk of osteoporosis in elderly years.

BOTTOMLINE: The National Institute of Medicine recommends that 9-18 year olds eat about 1300mg per day to help reach peak bone mass. This can be obtained via high-calcium foods or calcium supplements. See table below for high calcium foods. If obtaining sufficient calcium through food is difficult, try a well-absorbed supplement such as calcium citrate (ex: Citracal).

NOTE: Limiting soda intake to a moderate intake is recommended since soda is high in phosphorus and some have caffeine, two nutrients that hurt bone building. On the other hand, weight-bearing exercise (such as walking, weight training or aerobics) helps the body to retain calcium in the bones.

Good Food Sources of Calcium: from: USDA Nutrient Database for Standard Reference and Manufacturers

Nonfat, plain yogurt (1 cup)=	350-400mg	Sardines (2oz.) =	220mg
Tofu, w/calcium (3oz.)=	175mg	OJ, fortified with calcium(1 C.)=	350mg
Milk, protein fortified (1cup)=	350mg	Low Fat, Fruit-flav. yogurt (1C.)=	250-350mg
Total cereal (3/4C.)=	200-250mg	Turnip greens(1C. cook)=	200mg
Fat free ricotta cheese (1/4cup)=	100-320mg	Oatmeal, fortified (1 pkt)=	165mg
Fat free or 1% milk (1 cup)=	300mg	Cottage Cheese (1C.)=	150mg
OJ, fortified, Minute Maid(1C.)=	300mg	Froz. yogurt/ice cream(1C.)=	150-300mg
Baked Beans,can(1C.)=	140mg	Swiss cheese (1oz.)=	270mg
Kale (1 cup cooked)=	95mg	Broccoli(1C. cooked)=	70mg

Limiting fast foods and school lunches:

Unfortunately, American teens are getting a large number of their meals from these two sources. You should consider many of our school lunches on the same level as fast foods since they often times provide large sources of unhealthy fats: saturated and trans fats with very few disease-fighting nutrients. Trans fats, which are man-made saturated fats, are abundant throughout the fast food industry, especially in items that are deep-fried.

BOTTOMLINE: Meals from these two places are tough to eliminate. So it might be best to compromise with the frequency and quality of the choices. Negotiate a number of homemade lunches to bring to school and let your child buy school lunch on days that some of their favorites are being offered. Encourage your child to try some of the following choices from fast food restaurants since they are some of the healthier choices. Healthy fast foods: Burger King BK Veggie Burger, McDonald's Fruit n' Yogurt Parfait, Subway's Low Fat Subs, McDonald's Chicken McGrill and Wendy's Mandarin Chicken Salad.

Brain Power:

Eating breakfast is very important for academic performance since the calories help the brain to function. Several studies have shown those who eat breakfast before going to school perform better on tests. A breakfast with protein in it can improve energy, mood, and awareness. It can also help increase satiety, which can minimize snacking on junk foods or having huge meal portions later in the day. Here are a few balanced breakfast ideas:

1. Whole grain cereal, low fat milk and fruit
2. Whole wheat toast, peanut butter and fruit
3. English muffin sandwich with scrambled egg and/or low fat cheese with a 4-6 oz juice
4. Fruit smoothie made with low fat vanilla yogurt blended with fruit and milk

Make snacks nutrient-filled and satisfying:

Having ready-to-eat healthy snacks available for a hungry teen after school can help a parent fulfill their share of the partnership. Encourage snacks that include fruits or veggies, for the nutrients, and a protein source, for satiation. Some healthy examples are:

High-fiber cereal, fruit and low fat milk; peanut butter and celery sticks, carrots and hummus, raisins and nuts, low fat cottage cheese and chopped veggies, low fat yogurt and fruit salad.

Family Meals, Healthy Relationships:

Adults *and teenagers* are busier than ever before. In many households, one of the first things to get eliminated, unfortunately, is the family meal. Family meals can happen at any mealtime, not just dinner. The importance of it is to have the family reconnect and share the events of the day. This encourages communication and nourishes family relationships. It also, encourages healthy, homemade meals that can be enjoyed by everyone together.

BOTTOMLINE: If family meals are lacking in your household, make a point to communicate with family members at the beginning of the week to plan the week's family meal times.

Encourage a healthy weight:

There are two sides to this recommendation.

1. Encourage mindful eating, drinking low calorie beverages and regular exercise.

Obesity amongst teenagers is the highest it has ever been in the United States. One-in-five U.S. children are currently classified as obese -- with a body mass index of 30 or higher. Incorporating the recommendations in this article can help teens to maintain a healthy weight. Another recommendation worth mentioning is to encourage mindful eating. Mindful eating is a skill that involves eating slowly without distractions (ie: TV, reading, computer, etc.) and paying attention to the food in your mouth so you can enjoy and appreciate each bite. This can reduce the need to eat large portions since a smaller amount is more satisfying when attention is paid to the food while it's in the mouth.

BOTTOMLINE: Encourage a separation of food from TV or computer area.

Sugary drinks, such as soda, juice and sports drinks, have taken over our teenage beverage choices by storm and could be contributing to teenage obesity. The sugar intake of teens has tripled over the past 30 years. A typical 12 fl oz soda or juice has the equivalent of about 10 teaspoons of sugar, which is about 150 calories. Switching to water, flavored seltzer waters or other flavored waters like Fruit 2-0 or Gatorade Propel can save a lot of calories and contribute to a healthy weight.

BOTTOMLINE: If your teenager needs to lose some weight, remind them that if they are able to cut out 150 calories (one soda) daily they will be able to lose 15 pounds in one year with no other changes. If they are thirsty, they need water not all the sugar that comes with the high-calorie drinks.

Our children today are more sedentary than ever before. Exercise is important for maintaining a healthy weight for teens just like it is for adults. **BOTTOMLINE:** *30-60 minutes of physical activity is the daily recommendation. It doesn't have to be exercise on a school sports team or other organized team. It could be walking home from school, dancing or mowing the lawn.*

2. Recognize signs of eating disorders and seek professional help:

Unfortunately, eating disorders amongst teens is becoming more common. The key to treatment and avoiding health problems is to identify early signs.

Potential signs of an eating disorder:

Rapid weight loss, dieting or counting calories, not eating in front of others, vegetarianism, compulsive over-exercising, skipping meals or vanishing into the bathroom after meals.

Perfection is not the goal for teen nutrition. Be content with making small improvements over time with your child's nutrition. And be happy knowing that your child is improving their nutrition so that these new habits can continue throughout the rest of their lives. Realize you can't make all the food choices for them and you can't force them to do something they are not ready for. Teenagers are old enough to make their own decisions and soon they will be doing it on their own. So do your part and let your teenager do theirs. Your relationship will grow stronger and your child's health will improve with every bite.

-Marc C. O'Meara, RD, LDN

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