

Parenting and Nutrition: A Healthy Combination

Those of us who are parents often wish that our children came with an instruction manual. As our kids grow, we realize just how difficult it is to figure out what they need in order to stay healthy and happy. Nutrition can be one of the most confusing areas of parenting, but it is certainly one of the most important. The bodies and minds of children are in their most critical developmental stages, and they need the right vitamins, nutrients, carbs, sugars, fats, and other components to become the best they can be. Here are some tips on how you can provide your children with fuel for a healthy life.

A Balanced Diet

The key to any healthy diet is balance. The body needs different nutrients, and over the years researchers have discovered the best balance of those nutrients. The principles of the five food groups apply for children as well as adults, but it is important to keep an eye on certain nutrients to make sure that kids are getting a little extra boost.

Probably the biggest obstacle to a healthy diet for children is the wide availability of “junk food.” Sugary sodas, candy, desserts, and high-fat fast food are the worst enemies of healthy growth, and unfortunately, those are precisely the foods that children are attracted to. It takes real effort on the part of parents to minimize their kids’ intake of processed, unhealthy foods, and increase the amount of vegetables, whole grains, and lean meats in their diet.

Don’t forget about the most important partner to good nutrition: good exercise. The body needs activity, as well as fuel, in order to grow stronger. Get your kids involved in school athletics and have them help around the house to keep them active.

LEARN MORE

Make smart decisions about your health and visit a physician or health specialist for advice and questions.

USDA Nutrition Information

www.choosemyplate.gov

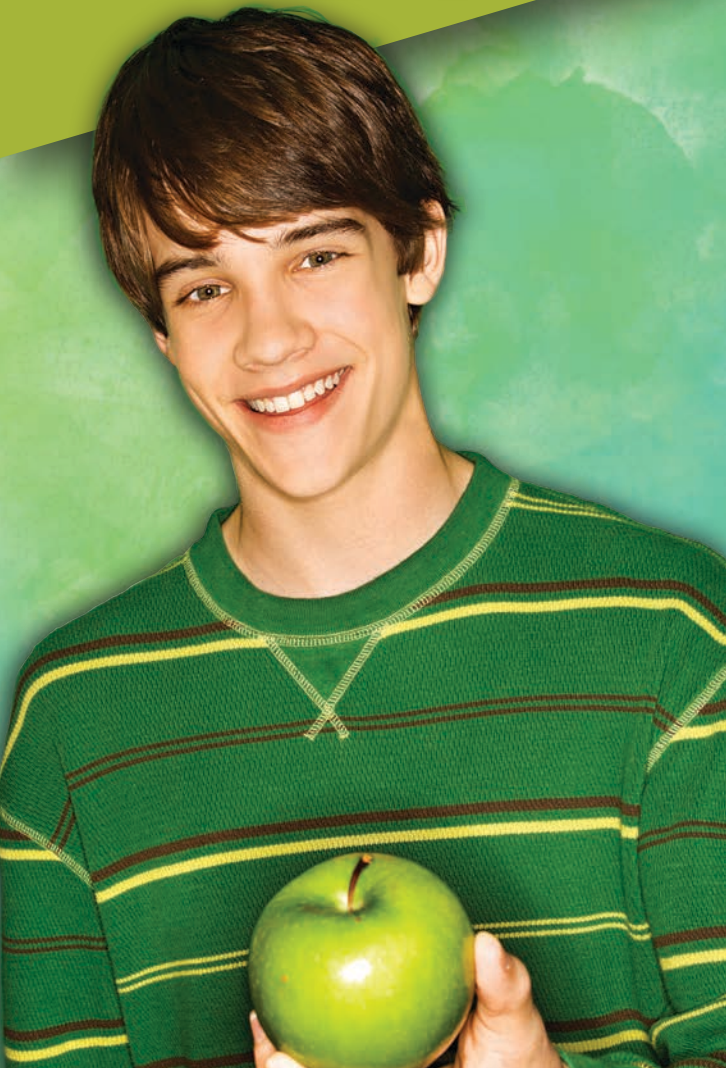
National Agriculture Library

www.nutrition.gov

American Society for Nutrition

www.nutrition.org

NUTRITION FOR GROWING CHILDREN



Don’t forget
about the most
important
partner to good
nutrition:
Good Exercise



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Changing Needs

Not only are children's dietary needs different from those of their parents, each stage in a child's life has unique needs. If you focus on meeting these needs, you will have a happy, energetic, and healthy child!

Infants and Toddlers

The first foods your baby should eat after breast milk or formula are all five healthy food groups – vegetables, fruit, grain foods, dairy and proteins. A gradual transition from milk to simple solid foods is best, and a pediatrician can help you decide when that transition should happen for your child. There are certain types of foods that you should avoid or severely limit: salty fatty and sugary foods, low-fiber foods, and drinks with caffeine or a lot of sugar. Also, avoid foods that are hard to chew and could cause choking.

Young Children

Proper Nutrition plays a crucial role in the growth and development of young children, helping to build a strong foundation for a healthy life ahead. Limit sugary and processed foods, as these provide empty calories and can contribute to health problems such as obesity and tooth decay.

Calcium, the body's building block, is needed to develop strong, healthy bones and teeth. Dairy foods are great sources of calcium. Low-fat yogurt, milk, cereals, waffles, and oatmeal are some of the best ways to get calcium into your child's diet.

During this stage of life, the common food group guidelines are very helpful. Children do not eat as much at each meal as adults, but the proportions outlined in the "food guide plate" are excellent starting points for constructing balanced meals.

Teenagers

As teenagers begin making more of their own food decisions, they often err on the side of unhealthy choices. It's very important to make sure that meals at home are full of healthy meats, vegetables, and whole grains to offset any increased fat and sugar intake during the day.

Teenagers are known for developing huge appetites, and parents often find their refrigerators depleted as their teens raid the kitchen between meals. Make sure that the snack options for your teen are healthy ones like vegetables, fruits, and whole grain bread. If there are cookies, soda, and frozen pizzas readily available, you can count on a teenager to go after them instead!

Know What Your Kids are Eating

Parents aren't the only ones placing food in front of their kids. They also eat meals at school, restaurants, and friends' homes. They buy food from vending machines, scrounge in the kitchen, and even prepare their own meals at times. Until your child has the nutritional knowledge and self-control to make healthy choices on their own, it is up to you to do it for them.



If your child eats a school provided lunch, be sure to plan home meals with the school menu in mind. Set rules about snacking at school; supervise what your kids order when dining out; and talk to them each day about what they eat when they are away from home.

Spotting Problems

Keep a sharp eye out for warning signs that your child isn't getting a healthy diet. Extra weight is the most obvious sign of a problem, but there are others as well. A child who always seems low on energy or lacks an interest in physical activity might not be getting enough fuel for their body. Slow development is another major problem and may reflect a vitamin deficiency.

Your best friend in spotting and correcting dietary problems is your pediatrician. If you have a specific question about your child's growth, don't hesitate to give the doctor a call and schedule a checkup.

Food Allergies

Growing children sometimes develop allergies, especially when they eat certain foods for the first time. With toddlers, use small portions and watch carefully when trying new foods, particularly nuts, fish, dairy, and foods including gluten. Allergies are more than just an inconvenience; they can be devastating to the body and a child's physical systems are often not yet capable of withstanding them safely.

Establish Good Habits for Life

Helping your kids eat right is more than just making sure their brains, muscles, and bones get the fuel they need to grow. It's also about helping them develop appetites for the kinds of foods that they should eat for the rest of their life. Children who grow up having lots of fat and sugar during and in between meals have a hard time retraining themselves to choose healthy foods as adults. Be sure to give them the right tools to stay healthy in life.



Reduce Sodium for Growing Bodies

One teaspoon of salt contains about 2,300 mg of sodium. If your child is between the ages of 1-8, they should not consume more than 1,200 mg to 1,500 mg of sodium per day. Older children and young adults ages 9-18 should not consume more than 1,800 to 2,300 mg of sodium per day.

Processed foods like frozen dinners and canned soup contain hidden extra sodium that exceeds the daily recommended limit. Choose fresh or frozen vegetables instead of canned veggies. Avoid salty snacks such as potato chips. Choose unsalted nuts and pretzels instead.

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