

## **Childhood obesity: Helping kids stay fit and healthy in the early years**

Since 1980, the number of children considered overweight has tripled—with more than nine million children and teens ages 6-19 currently deemed overweight by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Doctors blame the growth in childhood obesity on less active lifestyles and poor eating habits.

Considering these alarming statistics, it's no wonder that this nation's obesity epidemic is being talked about and revisited extensively—and not just with national research organizations and the CDC. School districts are also now in the thick of helping parents gain a better understanding of the importance of teaching children about the lifelong benefits of eating healthy and slimming down or maintaining a healthy weight.

“In the past few years, we've done more than just use our health curriculum to reach out to our students about developing healthy eating habits—we've actually changed our school lunch program to show kids what nutritious and well-balanced meals looks like and how to make healthy food choices,” says one school food service supervisor.

These efforts, and others like them, have paid off. Last school year, the New York State Comptroller's Office audited 20 school districts from across the state to determine whether schools are ensuring that all food available to students during the school day and at school activities meets established nutritional guidelines to promote healthy eating habits and proper nutrition goals.

The overall findings of the audit were positive, with school lunch programs offering students nutritious meals within the established guidelines. It's in the competitive food market—vending machines and a la carte items—where some districts still need to make improvements.

“Children might be eating healthy school lunches or bringing them from home, but the reality is that there will always be unhealthy snacks that are high in fat, calories, and sugar available for consumption,” says one nutritionist. “The goal is to teach kids about good nutrition so that they make healthy choices rather than reaching for a candy bar or chips when they want a snack.”

## **Bring healthy eating to the home front**

A recent study conducted by Brian Wansink, Ph.D., a researcher and author of *Mindless Eating*, shows that children who eat a wide range of healthy foods at home also make nutritious choices when their parents aren't around. He explains that children who are used to eating a variety of different foods tended to eat fewer snacks and select more nutritious meals than picky eaters did.

Buttered noodles may be a staple of your child's dinner plate, but making a few small healthy changes can help alter your child's palate and opinion about trying new foods.

“Getting kids to eat nutritious, well-balanced meals is not as hard as parents may think,” explains Wansink. “There are a few basic guidelines—and persistence—that parents can adopt.”

Key steps include offering a variety of foods, involving children in menu planning and meal preparation, and providing visual stimulation. For example, children are much more likely to be drawn to slices of raw green, yellow, red and orange peppers than a pile of soggy, dark green cooked peppers.

- **Offer a variety of foods.** It might be hard at first to start introducing new foods to your child, but start small by substituting healthier versions of your child's favorite food. For example, switch regular pasta to whole wheat, but try to find the same or similar style of noodle so there's some familiarity for your child. "My 7-year-old son loves grilled cheese," says one mother. "I modified the 'old-school' recipe by using a butter substitute spread, whole wheat bread, and low-fat cheese, and he still loves it."

Another fun way to bring new and healthy food into the house is by introducing "Rainbow Food Week" to your family. This is where one week out of each month your family eats fruits and vegetables that match the colors of the rainbow. For example, if Monday is red day, make an all-red fruit salad using raspberries, strawberries, red grapes, and watermelon. On purple Friday, opt for shredded purple cabbage and peppers in your tossed salad. Go a step further by visiting farmer's markets and organic grocers to find exotic fruits and vegetables, or different types of whole grains, such as quinoa, millet, bulgur wheat, brown rice, and whole wheat couscous.

Keep in mind that it might take up to 10 tries to get your child to like a new food. To help, try to encourage a minimum one-bite rule, which can help broaden the repertoire of healthy foods your kids will eat. After a few meals, your child might simply eat the entire portion without you overseeing the process. And, since children learn by example, one of the best things parents can do is eat healthy, too.

- **Adopt a two veggie rule at dinner.** Make two different vegetable side dishes to accompany the rest of the meal, and then have your children choose which one (or both!) they want. Also have your children serve themselves. "Children seem to respond better to eating vegetables when they feel like they're part of the process," says one nutritionist who specializes in childhood obesity.
- **Make food visually appealing—and fun.** Adults and kids, alike, should have a rainbow of foods at every meal. But just putting a cup of blueberries next to your child's morning cereal doesn't mean he'll eat them. Instead, make colorful fruit kabobs by skewering chunks of cantaloupe and honeydew melon, strawberries, blueberries and other fruits on a stick. Instead of a tossed salad, switch it up a bit with a fresh vegetable platter and low-fat dip. Bring out your creative side for the younger kids by making vegetable faces on each person's plate (better yet, show your kids how to do it.) Use cucumber slices with black olives on top for eyes, pepper slices for the mouth, a cherry tomato for the nose, and carrot sticks for hair.
- **Involve children in the meal planning and preparation process.** Before heading off to the grocery store, sit down with your children and flip through some cookbooks, especially

children's cookbooks that have pictures of the finished meal. Encourage them to help you plan the week's menu. A recent study found that children ages 4-8 ate more vegetables and more salad when they had a hand in preparing them. Veggie pizzas, fish or vegetarian tacos, and vegetable soup are easy meals your child can help make.

- **Don't use junk food as a reward.** The idea behind adopting a healthy eating habit or lifestyle is to choose foods that are good for you rather than less nutritious alternatives. That doesn't mean a child can't have a cupcake at a birthday party, but using dessert foods (cookies, cake, ice cream) on a nightly basis as leverage to get kids to eat their vegetables gives the wrong impression about wholesome foods.

"We want today's youth to have a healthy relationship with food," says one pediatrician. "It's better to simply teach kids why they need wholesome, nutritious foods so that they can be empowered to make the right choices for themselves and their bodies."

## Get physical

As important as good nutrition is, it needs to partner with physical activity in order to help children grow, be fit and strong, as well as develop a lifelong commitment to physical activity.

Schools provide a variety of opportunities to help kids get moving during the day, including physical education classes, recess, intramural sports, and, in some districts, before- and after-school fitness programs. But kids need to be active outside of the school day, too, for optimum health.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, the average child is watching about three hours of [television](#) a day. And the average kid spends 5½ hours on all screen media combined (TV, videos and DVDs, computer time outside of schoolwork, and video games).

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that screen time should be limited to no more than 1-2 hours of *quality programming* a day for children 2 years and older.

One way to ensure your children are getting their daily dose of exercise is by moving together as a family.

- After dinner, leash the dog and go for a walk. This is a great time to talk to each other about the day, school projects, or to plan the family's weekend activities.
- Host family competitions—who can jump rope or hula hoop the longest without messing up. Or play a game of tag or Red Light, Green Light.
- On the weekends, go for a family hike or hit a bike path to burn some calories and strengthen muscles. When the weather turns too cold, hit indoor gyms that offer rock-climbing or rollerblading, for instance.

- Get your child involved in organized recreational activities outside of school, such as karate, swimming, fencing, ballet, or gymnastics.
- Sign the whole family up for yoga class or ballroom dancing.

### Healthy snack ideas

If you are a time-strapped parent who relies on pre-packed goodies for your children to snack on, take a look at these nutritious and tasty snacks that require minimal prep time.

- Low-fat string cheese sticks with five whole-grain crackers.
- Low-fat yogurt with a ¼ cup almonds, walnuts, or whole-grain cereals such as GrapeNuts or All-Bran Buds.
- Fruit such as bananas, oranges, apples, peaches, plums, nectarines, and pears that don't have to be cut up and/or stored in a container (save those fruits for dessert!)
- Pre-packaged raisins, dried cranberries, etc. (If you've got a minute or two, mix a ½ cup of whole grain cereal, such as Cheerios, with a ¼ cup of raisins and a ¼ cup of almonds or sunflower seeds for a tasty trail mix.
- The classic “ants on a log”—peanut butter spread on a celery stalk topped with raisins—still offers a power-packed snack to kids. (If your children's school bans peanut products, make this for a weekend snack or use almond or other nut butters instead.)

Need some more snack—or meal ideas? Check out these kid-friendly recipe books.

- ***The Top 100 Recipes for a Healthy Lunchbox: Easy and Exciting Ideas for Your Child's Lunches.*** This book contains 100 immune system-boosting recipes (including photos) for everything from healthy sandwiches, soups, salads, and wraps to delicious cookies, cakes, and other yummy desserts! Each easy-to-follow recipe is accompanied by a wealth of nutritional information, as well as clever tips for preparing multiple meals ahead of time, and time-saving food storage ideas.
- ***Healthy Snacks for Kids.*** With this book, you'll always have ideas for sandwiches, snacks, and drinks—even breakfast and dinner treats that will keep your kids healthy, strong and energetic. The recipe titles in this book are almost as yummy as the recipes themselves: Monkey Bars, Wiggle Sicles, Corny Pudding, Tomato Balloons.
- ***Veggie Friends and Fruits Too: A Children's Cookbook on Creating Healthy Snacks.*** Veggie Friends and Fruits Too is a cookbook that shows children how to create healthy snacks using vegetables and fruits. The purpose of this book is to get children interested

in nutritious eating as they assemble fresh and natural ingredients into the fun animal and insect shapes that are illustrated on these pages.

- ***Kids' Fun and Healthy.*** Put the fun back into healthy eating with this bright and colorful cookbook. This lively collection encourages kids to consider what they eat and how it affects their bodies, without preaching. Yummy interpretations of old classics, as well as new recipes destined to become classic help turn eating into a delicious treat.