



Childhood Nutrition – What You Need to Know

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 5 children in the United States are obese. Obesity is a serious health problem that puts children at risk for type 2 diabetes, asthma, anxiety and depression, and low self-esteem. The rates of childhood obesity have been on the rise, and the importance of childhood nutrition is at an all-time high (CDC, 2021). Nutrition not only affects physical health, but also intellectual development, school performance, emotional and psychological well-being, and behavior. A solid nutritional foundation is important to proper childhood development and health over a lifetime.

Food as Fuel

Food contains nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates, protein and fat. Food intake impacts energy and how the body copes with ongoing illness. Lack of nutrient-dense foods and overeating can lead to poor nutrition and future disease. It is important to teach children how to properly fuel their bodies through food and nutrition. This will help them set a course to make healthier dietary choices now and as they mature into adulthood.

Learning healthy eating habits in childhood and adolescence is not only important for proper growth and physical development, but also for emotional and mental well-being, cognitive functioning and preventing future health conditions. So, what are “healthy eating habits” and how can you be sure your child is getting proper nutrition?

While we all need nutrients, children need different amounts of specific nutrients at different ages (Mayo Clinic, 2021). It is important to talk to your child’s doctor or health care practitioner about their unique dietary and nutritional needs. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S.

Department of Agriculture (USDA) offer Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025 for eating a healthy and balanced diet. These guidelines recommend people aged 2 and older follow an eating pattern that includes a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fat-free and low-fat dairy products, a variety of protein foods, and oils. Additionally, it is recommended children limit consumption of foods and beverages higher in added sugars or acids, saturated fat and sodium. Introducing your children to water as a beverage at an early age can also have a positive impact on the effort to reduce added sugars and acids into their diet.

Overcoming Challenges for Better Nutrition

Ease of access to convenience foods, picky eaters and financial constraints are a few commonly cited barriers to healthy eating. Let’s face it, processed foods are highly accessible, and time constraints make convenience and fast foods an easy choice. Some children are inherently picky eaters, making healthy eating a battle, and there may be times when one simply cannot afford nutritious foods. Whether you have a toddler or a teen, your child’s nutrition is important to their physical and mental health. The following tips can help address common barriers to healthy eating.

Plan Ahead

Write out meal ideas and make a shopping list based on the foods you need and the money you have to spend. Buy food options you can freeze or use before they spoil and remember that frozen, canned and shelf-stable foods last longer. Planning can also encourage the use of leftovers. Prepare lunches for the week on a Sunday evening, for example, by chopping salads or making sandwich fillings.



Tackle Picky Eating

Picky eating behavior is common for children and usually ends before school starts. As long as your child is growing as the doctor suggests, he or she is most likely eating enough to be healthy. If you have concerns about your child's growth or eating behavior, talk to their doctor. To deal with picky eating, the USDA recommends offering new foods at the start of a meal as this is when children are most hungry. The USDA also recommends starting with small portions, offering choices and having your child help prepare meals. This way your child can get excited about tasting foods and develop tastes for more nutrient-dense foods. Let them add ingredients, scrub veggies or help stir food.

Spend Smart

It may seem that fast food is less expensive than cooking at home, but a meal for two at a fast-food restaurant is likely to cost \$10 to \$15, and for a family of four it's closer to \$20 to \$30. Preparing a meal of healthy beef stew or roasted chicken with vegetables can cost significantly less and may even leave you with leftovers. Healthy food choices don't have to cost a lot. The USDA offers the following tips for filling your grocery cart with affordable and healthy options from each food group (USDA, 2015):

BREADS AND GRAINS

- Choose whole-grain breads. Look for bargains on day-old varieties.
- Buy regular brown rice and old-fashioned oats and grits instead of instant varieties to save money and consume less sugar, salt and calories.

VEGETABLES

- Buy large bags of frozen vegetables.
- When choosing canned vegetables, look for "low sodium" or "no added salt" on the label. Drain canned vegetables and add tap water, this helps with cutting down on the added salt preservatives.

Sources:

Nutrition for kids: Guidelines for a healthy diet - Mayo Clinic
Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/index.html>
<https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/index.html>
<https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/Early-Care-Education-ECE-WEB-508.pdf>
Healthy Tips for Picky Eaters (usda.gov)
<https://www.myplate.gov/eat-healthy/healthy-eating-budget/make-plan>
<https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/snap/EatRightWhenMoney'sTight.pdf>

FRUITS

- Buy fresh fruit in season — it generally costs less.
- Frozen and canned fruits are available year-round, can save you money and have similar nutrition values to fresh.

LOW-FAT OR FAT-FREE MILK PRODUCTS

- Buy low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt and cheese in the largest size that can be used before spoiling. Larger containers cost less per serving than smaller sizes.
- Ultra-pasteurized milk found on store shelves has a longer expiration date and won't spoil as fast.

MEAT AND BEANS

- Dried beans and peas are a good source of protein and fiber. They can last a year or more without spoiling.
- Canned tuna packed in water is an inexpensive healthy protein choice. Light tuna has less mercury than white (albacore) tuna.

Developing healthy eating habits in childhood is a must! Inviting your child to help prepare breakfast, lunch or dinner is a great way to start. Getting children to learn about the foods they eat and how to make healthier selections now will lead to a healthier lifestyle and improved health and well-being. To learn more about The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025 and the benefits of healthy eating, visit: <https://www.myplate.gov/>.

Now let's eat... healthy!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Cameual Wright".

Dr. Cameual Wright, Vice President,
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The CareSource logo features a stylized purple heart icon above the word "CareSource" in a bold, sans-serif font.