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Healthy Eating

Whether you have a toddler or a teen, here are five of the best strategies to improve nutrition and encourage smart eating habits:

1. Have regular family meals.
2. Serve a variety of healthy foods and snacks.
3. Be a role model by eating healthy yourself.
4. Avoid battles over food.
5. Involve kids in the process.

Sure, eating well can be hard — family schedules are hectic and grab-and-go convenience food is readily available. But our tips can help make all five strategies part of your busy household.

Family Meals

Family meals are a comforting ritual for both parents and kids. Children like the predictability of family meals and parents get a chance to catch up with their kids. Kids who take part in regular family meals are also:

- more likely to eat fruits, vegetables, and grains
- less likely to snack on unhealthy foods
- less likely to smoke, use marijuana, or drink alcohol

Also, family meals are a chance for parents to introduce kids to new foods and to be role models for healthy eating.

Teens may turn up their noses at the prospect of a family meal — not surprising because they're busy and want to be more independent. Yet studies find that teens still want their parents' advice and counsel, so use mealtime as a chance to reconnect.

You might also try these tips:

- Allow kids to invite a friend to dinner.
- Involve your child in meal planning and preparation.
- Keep mealtime calm and friendly — no lectures or arguing.

What counts as a family meal? Whenever you and your family eat together — whether it's takeout food or a home-cooked meal with all the trimmings. Strive for nutritious food and a time when everyone can be there. This may mean eating dinner a little later to accommodate a teen who's at sports practice. It also can mean setting aside time on the weekends when it may be more convenient to gather as a group, such as for Sunday brunch.

Stock Up on Healthy Foods

Kids, especially younger ones, will eat mostly what's available at home. That's why it's important to control the supply lines — the foods that you serve for meals and have on hand for snacks.

Follow these basic guidelines:

- **Work fruits and vegetables into the daily routine**, aiming for the goal of at least five servings a day. Be sure you serve fruit or vegetables at every meal.
- **Make it easy for kids to choose healthy snacks** by keeping fruits and vegetables on hand and ready to

eat. Other good snacks include low-fat yogurt, peanut butter and celery, or whole-grain crackers and cheese.

- **Serve lean meats and other good sources of protein**, such as fish, eggs, beans, and nuts.
- **Choose whole-grain breads and cereals** so kids get more fiber.
- **Limit fat intake** by avoiding fried foods and choosing healthier cooking methods, such as broiling, grilling, roasting, and steaming. Choose low-fat or nonfat dairy products.
- **Limit fast food and low-nutrient snacks**, such as chips and candy. But don't completely ban favorite snacks from your home. Instead, make them "once-in-a-while" foods, so kids don't feel deprived.
- **Limit sugary drinks**, such as soda and fruit-flavored drinks. Serve water and low-fat milk instead.

Be a Role Model

The best way for you to encourage healthy eating is to eat well yourself. Kids will follow the lead of the adults they see every day. By eating fruits and vegetables and not overindulging in the less nutritious stuff, you'll be sending the right message.

Another way to be a good role model is to serve appropriate portions and not overeat. Talk about your feelings of fullness, especially with younger children. You might say, "This is delicious, but I'm full, so I'm going to stop eating." Similarly, parents who are always dieting or complaining about their bodies may foster these same negative feelings in their kids. Try to keep a positive approach about food.

Don't Battle Over Food

It's easy for food to become a source of conflict. Well-intentioned parents might find themselves bargaining or bribing kids so they eat the healthy food in front of them. A better strategy is to give kids some control, but to also limit the kind of foods available at home.

Kids should decide if they're hungry, what they will eat from the foods served, and when they're full. Parents control which foods are available to their kids, both at mealtime and between meals. Here are some guidelines to follow:

- **Establish a predictable schedule of meals and snacks.** It's OK to choose not to eat when both parents and kids know when to expect the next meal or snack.
- **Don't force kids to clean their plates.** Doing so teaches kids to override feelings of fullness.
- **Don't bribe or reward kids with food.** Avoid using dessert as the prize for eating the meal.
- **Don't use food as a way of showing love.** When you want to show love, give kids a hug, some of your time, or praise.

Get Kids Involved

Most kids will enjoy deciding what to make for dinner. Talk to them about making choices and planning a balanced meal. Some might even want to help shop for ingredients and prepare the meal. At the store, teach kids to check out food labels to begin understanding what to look for.

In the kitchen, select age-appropriate tasks so kids can play a part without getting injured or feeling overwhelmed. And at the end of the meal, don't forget to praise the chef.

School lunches can be another learning lesson for kids. More important, if you can get them thinking about what they eat for lunch, you might be able to help them make positive changes. Brainstorm about what kinds of foods they'd like for lunch or go to the grocery store to shop together for healthy, packable foods.

There's another important reason why kids should be involved: It can help prepare them to make good decisions on their own about the foods they want to eat. That's not to say they'll suddenly want a salad instead of french fries, but the mealtime habits you help create now **can** lead to a lifetime of healthier choices.

Check out some healthy recipes for kids of all ages.

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