

# Habits for a Healthy Weight

Are your children overweight? Whether they need to shed just a few pounds or are more seriously overweight, there are ways you can help. Consider these ideas to help them lose weight while learning healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime.



## Track food intake

Making healthy choices may be easier if your teen knows more about his diet right now. Suggest that he keep a food diary. In a small notebook or on a computer or phone, he can record what he eats, how much, and when. Writing down what he eats will encourage him to think about the choices he's making—and seeing the list can be a wake-up call in itself.

Encourage him to look over his entries and reflect on how he eats and changes he could make. For instance, maybe he's really hungry after school and has one snack after another without stopping to consider whether he's full. You could suggest that he eat one nutritious, filling snack (say, peanut butter on whole-wheat toast or on an apple), and wait before eating more to see if he's still hungry.

## Make a plan

Help your child write down a plan, setting goals for eating and physical activity. Encourage her to be realistic and build in gradual changes. *Note:* Let her know that fad diets don't work long-term—she won't keep the weight off—and they can be unhealthy for her growing body.

For example, she could cut down on soda or increase her workout time each week. While she might want to set actual weight-loss goals, steer her toward healthy habits instead. The weight will come off, and she will feel better.



## Keep meals regular

Your teen may think that skipping breakfast or lunch is a good way to lose weight. In fact, it can lead to bad habits like overeating later.

Eating breakfast first thing in the morning will actually jumpstart his metabolism—which is a good thing!

Also, eating meals and snacks at roughly the same time each day lets your child's body know what to expect, making it less likely that he'll crave extra snacks. Explain that he needs energy from regular meals, and he'll feel more satisfied throughout the day.

## Figure out servings

Portions play a big role in the success of any eating plan. Help your teen become more aware of serving sizes by looking together at portion information on food labels. Make sure she realizes that one package might have multiple servings—but the calorie and nutrition information applies

to only one serving. For instance, even a “small” bag of cookies or chips might contain two to three servings.

You can also suggest a few “tricks” to make portion sizes feel larger. She might use smaller plates and bowls for meals and snacks, for instance. When she eats out, she could order an appetizer as her meal. Or she can split restaurant entrees—which tend to be oversized anyway—with a friend or family member.

## Find support

Losing weight will be easier if your child has support from family, friends, or others trying to lose weight. She could enroll in a weight management program for teens, a class at a local hospital, or a program at her school.



Or she might join forces with a friend who also wants to lose weight. They could exercise together and check in with each other about what they're eating—or even call for support before reaching for a piece of cake. Finally, a great way to help your teen is for the whole family to eat healthfully. She'll be more apt to stick to her plan if she's not watching her parents or siblings eating hot fudge sundaes!



## Get hooked on exercise

Encourage your teen to make exercise a part of his daily routine. Physical activity is not only an important part of losing weight, it's a way of healthy living. Help him find activities he will enjoy, whether

it's organized sports (lacrosse, soccer), individual activities (running, swimming), working out at a gym, or outdoor pursuits like hiking, climbing, or kayaking.

As with tracking food, encourage your child to record his exercise. He should get at least 60 minutes a day. That might seem like a lot to do at once, but he can find ways to stay active throughout the day. For instance, he could bike instead of driving to friends' houses, take stairs rather than elevators, run in place during TV commercials, or walk around the block for study breaks.

## Focus on health

Try to keep the focus on being healthy rather than on how your child looks. That can be especially difficult when she's saturated with magazine, internet, and television images of super-thin models and actors. Remind her that those images are unrealistic.

Let her know that her self-worth is about who she is as a person, not what her body looks like. Then, talk about the long-term benefits of maintaining a healthy weight (preventing heart disease and diabetes, for example). If she appreciates that exercise and the right diet are about helping her body stay energized and healthy, she might be more motivated to continue her good eating habits.

## Drink to your health!

Does your teen know that simply by eliminating soda, he'll probably lose weight? And soda isn't the only culprit in the "liquid calorie" department. In fact, many drinks may seem like a good choice, but they contain sugar—and calories. For example, a regular 20-ounce sports drink has 140 calories and 36 grams of sugar and a 16-ounce bottle of orange juice has 206 calories and 37 grams of sugar.



Having one of these drinks every once in a while is okay, but encourage your child to choose water to stay hydrated and healthy. A glass of fat-free milk a day is a healthy addition to his diet, too.

## The emotional side

Your child's weight may fluctuate as she grows. That's normal. But if her weight suddenly jumps, you may want to consider these questions:

- *Is she eating more because of stress?* Maybe she's been studying for an important test at school or her best friend decided she didn't want to be friends anymore. A variety of things might trigger your teen to start eating to make herself feel better. Talk to her about other ways to boost her mood, like listening to upbeat music or getting exercise, which helps her body release "feel good" chemicals called endorphins.
- *Is your teen rewarding himself with food?* If he celebrates doing well on a test with a few cupcakes or other calorie-laden treat,



you might want to suggest another way to recognize his work. Perhaps you could go to the gym together for a game of racquetball, or he could go bowling with his friends. Try to help your teen see activity, not food, as a reward.

- *Is she putting herself down?* Along with overeating, watch for your teenager saying things like, "I always look fat in these jeans" or "I wish I were skinny like Jenny." An occasional comment can be okay, but too many may mean she needs to talk to someone other than a parent. Consider talking to the counselor at school or your child's health-care provider for advice. Also, remind her to be patient—losing weight in a healthy way can take time.

*Editor's Note:* Teen Food & Fitness™ is reviewed by a registered dietitian. Consult a physician before beginning any major change in diet or exercise.

