

Healthy Nutrition for Youth

Fact Sheet

Choosing a healthy diet during adolescence is important. Why?

- Poor dietary habits are related to obesity, osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease and Type 2 diabetes.
- The rate of growth in adolescence is second only to the rate in infancy.
- Because each teen may be at a different phase of growth, a “one size fits all” approach to nutrition doesn’t always work. Adults need to stay aware of a teen’s growth, and support healthy eating habits.
- Mature bones, body tissues and organ systems are developing.
- Normal bone strength may never be reached if a youth doesn’t get enough calcium.
- Eating habits developed during adolescence can set the tone for a lifetime of eating!
- Over-eating, under-eating and eating disorders can have devastating health impacts.
- Teens should eat frequent meals and healthy snacks. Eating breakfast has been shown to help teens be more alert at school and perform better in sports activities.
- Too little food or the wrong food can affect sexual maturation and growth.

What are the healthy eating guidelines?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Department of Health and Human Services, and the Food and Drug Administration have published dietary guidelines:

- Aim for Fitness – Aim for a healthy weight and be physically active each day
- Build a healthy base – Let the pyramid guide your food choices
 - Choose a variety of grains daily, especially whole grains
 - Choose a variety of fruits and vegetables daily
 - Keep foods safe to eat
- Choose sensibly
 - Choose a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol and moderate in total fat
 - Choose beverages and foods to moderate your intake of sugars
 - Choose and prepare foods with less salt
- Children and adolescents should not drink alcoholic beverages.

The dietary guidelines suggest at least the following number of daily servings from each of these food groups. An active growing teenage boy or girl would need the upper range

of servings, while a less active teen that is not having a growth spurt would need the lower range of servings. The key is the serving size.

- Vegetables: 3–5 servings
- Fruits: 2–4 servings.
- Breads, cereals, rice and pasta: 6–11 servings
- Milk, yogurt and cheese: 2–3 servings. Teens should have 3 or more servings of foods rich in calcium.
- Meats, poultry, fish, dried beans and peas, eggs and nuts: 2–3 servings

If more calories are needed than provided by the lower numbers of servings in the ranges, additional servings from the major food groups are suggested, along with modest increases in amounts of total fat and added sugars.

How Can Parents and Adults Who Care About Teens Help?

- Make healthy choices available and easy. Ask teens what they are willing to try.
- Morning meal: Set the table the night before. Set out healthy foods.
- Dinner: Eat together with your teens. Be a role model for healthy eating habits.
- Teach teens to read food labels so they know what they are eating or not eating.
- Praise good choices and actions.
- Limit eating “saturated fats” found in cheeseburgers, ice cream and pizza.
- Keep low fat snacks on hand, such as pretzels, peeled carrots, and juice.
- Encourage any kind of exercise!
- Make sure your teens get enough calcium – 3 servings a day.
- If you have concerns that a teen might have an eating disorder, seek help from a doctor that specializes in treating eating disorders.

Some Facts about Tennessee Youth

According to the 2007 Tennessee Youth Risk Behavioral Survey results, 16.9% of Tennessee’s high school students are overweight.

- Overweight discrepancy among males and females in Tennessee is similar to national percentages; high school males (21.6%) are much higher than high school females (12.0%).
- Also, there is a discrepancy across racial lines. African American high school students have higher obesity rates (19.6%) than white (16.2%) or Hispanic high school students (15.5%).
- Sixty-one per cent of high school students reported that they had exercised to lose weight or to keep from gaining weight during the past 30 days.

- Approximately 11.5% of high school students reported fasting, and 6.2% reported using diet pills, powders, or liquids to lose weight or to keep from gaining weight during the past 30 days.
- One reason for the increasing girth of today's youth may be portion size. The current sizes of teen fast food favorites – french fries, hamburgers and soda – are two to five times larger than the time before fast food restaurants became widespread.