

Healthy Mealtime Habits: 13 to 18 Years

As any parent of a teenage child can tell you, the teen years are a time of tremendous change. Body size and shape are transformed, thought processes become more abstract: in short, your child is becoming an adult. In the midst of all this change, good nutrition should be a constant in your adolescent's life. Healthy food choices provide the fuel for this incredible growth and form the basis of good eating habits that will last well into adulthood.

Family Meals

By now your teen may be well versed in healthy meal preparation and even cooking. In fact, about 7 in 10 teens regularly fix their own dinners, as do 1 in 3 children ages 6 to 11 years. Fewer families sit down together every night to a hearty, healthy, home-cooked meal. Now more than ever, meals seem to be grabbed on the go with less opportunity to consider nutritional balance.

To illustrate the important lesson of nutrition to your child, give him increasing responsibility for family meal preparation. Even before he's old enough to drive, he can take his turn as the supermarket shopper. Let your teen take your grocery list to the store and learn how to make the selections based on nutritional value.

Since teens highly value their independence, they tend to want to spend a lot of time away from home. One way to encourage a few family meals each week is to put your teenager in charge of dinner on certain evenings. Teach your teen to prepare favorite meals (even simple dinners can be nutritious). That way you can encourage healthy eating habits while spending quality time together. Since your teen consumes most of his daily calories away from your watchful eyes, the family meal is also a good way to pack in the most nutritious foods you can. Think of meals you share with your teen as an insurance policy for his well-being. The entire family will benefit nutritionally from your efforts.

Meals Away From Home

Time away from parents helps teens develop the social skills necessary to make it as adults. Tips to ensure your child develops healthy eating habits:

- Make sure your child eats a nutritious breakfast.
- If your teen takes lunch to school, he should be encouraged to make his own - this allows more opportunities for teens to learn about nutrition through meal preparation. If your child eats the school lunch, keep an eye on snack and lunch menus to make sure they meet your standards for nutrition. If they don't, make your concerns known to your teen and to the appropriate staff at the school.
- Offer your teen advice on how to choose healthy foods in a restaurant. For example, encourage him to include a salad or vegetables in his meals when eating out.
- Continue to offer your teen new and interesting foods at home, so that he has a wide variety of healthy choices when he is eating out.

Many teens are fast-food fans, so remember to teach your adolescent the benefits of choosing low-fat selections. The typical cheeseburger, fries, and soda may be enticing, but encourage him to look for salads, grilled chicken sandwiches, and baked potatoes (without all the butter and sour cream). If your teenager simply must have that burger, suggest the simplest one on the menu rather than the double-decker, cheese-and-heavy-sauce-smothered advertised special. Remind your teen that fast-food restaurants offer milk and juices, too, encouraging him to limit the sodas and milk shakes. And remember to set a good example yourself. You'll be helping yourself as well as your teenager.

Breakfast

Whether your child chows down on a full breakfast at home, eats a brown-bag breakfast on the ride to school, or buys a cafeteria breakfast once he gets there, there is no meal that is more important than the first one of the day. Studies show that kids who skip breakfast or who eat unhealthy breakfast foods, like doughnuts or pastries, can have a hard time concentrating just a few hours later. To head off this problem, find foods your teen likes to eat and serve them in the morning, even if they're not "traditional" breakfast fare. Let your teen heat up some spaghetti or leftover pizza at 7 AM. These options sure beat sugary cereals and pastries nutritionally, and they will help your teen do his best all morning long.

If your child does not have time to eat at home, have your child pack a healthy breakfast to take along to school, such as low-fat yogurt, fruit, and whole-grain toast. Even if your teen claims that he is not hungry or has no time, encourage him to take something that can be eaten on the way. Also, remember to set a good example yourself by eating breakfast regularly.

Snacks

Teens are often "super-snackers" or "grazers." After-school activities, outings with friends, and late arrivals at home make snacking impossible to avoid. If this is the case with your teenager, you'll want to emphasize healthy food choices at snack time, since a lot of unwanted fat and calories can creep into a teen's diet through these extra little meals. The best idea, especially for today's hectic households, is to keep good-tasting, good-for-you foods accessible. Ask your teen what he'd like to have on hand and make the snacks easy to prepare and grab on the go. This lessens the temptation to eat high-fat fare. Maximize the nutritional value of snacks by combining a few of the ideas below:

- microwave popcorn (low-salt, low-fat variety)
- fresh fruit
- celery and carrot sticks with low-fat dip or dressing
- raisins and other dried fruits
- low-fat milk and yogurt
- low-sugar cereals
- unsweetened applesauce
- frozen bananas
- graham crackers
- fresh fruit juice or frozen fruit juice on a stick
- pretzels
- "trail mix" - dried fruits, nuts, low-sugar cereal, mini-pretzels