

## Healthy Eating: Habits for Kids



### How do you help your child learn healthy eating habits?

Share with your child the responsibility for healthy eating. You decide when, where, and what the family eats. Your child chooses whether and how much to eat from the options you provide.

Young children are good at listening to their bodies. They eat when they're hungry. They stop when they're full. When you try to control how much children eat, you interfere with this natural ability. Keeping this division of responsibility helps your child stay in touch with those internal cues.

### What are some first changes to make?

Use some of the following ideas to get started. If you have other ideas that work for your family, add them to the list.

- **Set up a regular snack and meal schedule.** Most children do well with three meals and two or three snacks a day. When your child's body is used to a schedule, hunger and appetite are more regular.

- **Find at least one food from each food group that your child likes,** and make sure it is available most of the time. Don't worry if your child likes only one vegetable or one or two kinds of meats or fruits. Kids tend to accept new foods gradually, and their preferences expand over time.
- **Provide a healthy breakfast.** A quick, healthy breakfast could be high-fiber cereal with milk and fruit, nonfat or low-fat yogurt, or whole-grain toast.
- **Eat as a family as often as possible.** Keep family meals pleasant and positive.
- **Don't buy junk food.** Get healthy snacks that your child likes, and keep them within easy reach.

### Are there guidelines to follow?

- **Serve modest portions.** For example, children between the ages of 2 and 8 should have 2 to 4 ounces of meat or other protein, like tofu or beans, each day. Children between the ages of 9 and 18 should have 5 to 6 ounces of meat or other protein each day. Remember that 3 ounces of meat is about the size of a deck of cards.
- **Limit sweet drinks.** Let your child drink no more than 1 small cup of juice, sports drink, or soda a day. Encourage your child to drink water when he or she is thirsty. Serve milk with meals.
- **Offer lots of vegetables and fruits every day.** Children between the ages of 2 and 8 should have 1 to 1½ cups of vegetables and 1 to 1½ cups of fruits each day. Children between the ages of 9 and 18 should have 2 to 3 cups of vegetables and 1½ to 2 cups of fruits each day. That may seem like a lot, but

it is not hard to reach this goal. For example, add some fruit to your child's morning cereal, and include carrot sticks in your child's lunch.

## How do you keep your plan going?

- **Offer new foods.** When trying a new food at a meal, be sure to include another food that your child already likes. Don't give up on offering new foods. Children may need many tries before they accept a new food.
- **Don't say "Clean your plate."** Try not to manage your child's eating with comments such as "Clean your plate" or "One more bite." Your child has the ability to tell when he or she is full. If your child ignores these internal signals, he or she will not be able to know when to stop eating.
- **Allow fast food every now and then.** Order the smallest portions available. Get your children in the habit of sharing one small order of french fries, for example.
- **Don't use food as a reward for success in school or sports.** Don't use favorite foods as rewards for good behavior. And don't reward

desired eating behavior (such as finishing a plate of food or trying a new food). If you serve dessert, consider it part of the meal, not a treat to follow the main course.

- **Be a good example.** If you don't want your child to eat less nutritious foods (for example, those that contain high amounts of fats or sugar), don't have them in the house. If you eat these foods but try to keep them away from your child, he or she will learn to sneak these foods, beg for them, or view them as highly desirable.

## Healthy eating for life

Help your child adopt lifetime healthy habits by teaching him or her about food.

- Grow some of your own food in your backyard or in a pot on your porch. Let your child have plants to take care of.
- Let your child start helping you cook as soon as he or she shows interest. Teach simple, healthy recipes.
- Let older children help you with shopping. Use it as a chance to teach them about food labels. Challenge them to find low-fat or low-sugar foods by reading the labels.