

Eating tips for teenagers

Good nutrition is essential for everyone, but it's especially important for growing teenagers. Unfortunately, many Australian teenagers have an unbalanced diet.

From the 2007 Australian National Children's Nutrition and Physical Activity survey, teenage boys and girls aged 14 to 16 ate only half the recommended serves of fruits and vegetables per day. One in three adolescents buys unhealthy takeaway food every day. If you eat takeaway food regularly, you are more likely to put on weight than if you eat fast food only occasionally.

It may require some effort to change your eating habits, but even a few simple changes will make a huge difference. You'll feel better and may find managing your weight easier.

Junk food is poor fuel for your body

Many teenagers eat junk food every day. This might be sugar-sweetened drinks like fizzy drinks and high-kilojoule snacks like potato chips. However, your body can't run properly on poor fuel.

Compared to home-cooked food, junk food (which includes fast food) is almost always:

- higher in fat, particularly saturated fat
- higher in salt
- higher in sugar
- lower in fibre
- lower in nutrients, such as calcium and iron
- served in larger portions, which means more kilojoules.

While a mid-life heart attack might seem too far away to be real, it may surprise you to know that you could have health problems already. A poor diet can cause weight gain, high blood pressure, constipation, fatigue and concentration problems – even when you're young.

Eating tips to improve your diet

Small changes can make a big impact. Try to:

- Cut back on, sugary drinks like soft drinks and energy drinks. Sugar-free versions are okay to drink sometimes, but sugar-free fizzy drinks are still acidic, which can have a negative effect on bone and dental health. Water is the healthiest drink – try adding a slice of lemon, lime or orange for flavour.
- Keep a fruit bowl stocked at home for fast and low-kilojoule snacks.
- Eat breakfast every day so you're less likely to snack on junk food at morning tea. A wholemeal or wholegrain breakfast cereal that is low in sugar served with low-fat milk can provide plenty of vitamins, mineral and fibre. Other fast and healthy options include yoghurt or wholemeal toast.
- Don't skip lunch or dinner either.
- Help with the cooking and think up new ways to create healthy meals. Make those old family recipes lower in fat by changing the cooking method – for example, grill, stir-fry, bake, boil or microwave, instead of deep frying.
- Reduce the size of your meals.
- Don't add salt to your food.
- Don't eat high-fat foods every time you visit a fast food outlet with your friends. Many of the popular fast food chains now have healthier food choices on the menu.
- Change your meeting place. Rather than meeting up with your friends at the local takeaway shop, suggest a food outlet that serves healthier foods, such as wholemeal rolls with vegetable fillings or sushi.

Change the way you think about food

There are lots of myths about healthy food. Don't make food choices based on false beliefs. Suggestions include:

- Compare the prices of junk foods against the price of healthier food options to see that 'healthy' doesn't have to mean 'expensive'.
- Experiment with different foods and recipes. You'll soon discover that a meal cooked with fresh ingredients always beats a limp burger or soggy chips.
- Try different 'fast' options like whole-wheat breakfast cereal, muesli, wholemeal bread, wholegrain muffins, fruit, yoghurt or pasta.
- Don't think that your diet has to be 'all or nothing'. Eating well doesn't mean you must be a health food freak. A good diet allows for treats occasionally.

Change your eating environment

Suggestions include:

- Lobby your school canteen for healthier food choices.
- Ask your school canteen to include a range of low-price healthy food choices.
- Help with the grocery shopping and choose fewer processed foods.
- Get involved in cooking at home.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dietitian
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. (02) 6163 5200

Things to remember

- A teenager who eats fast food regularly is more likely to put on weight than a teenager who eats fast food only occasionally.
- A diet consisting of healthy meals and snacks will boost your intake of nutrients such as calcium, which is required for strong bones.
- Eating well doesn't mean you must be a health food freak – a good diet allows for your favourite junk foods occasionally.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Deakin University - School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences

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