

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 consumed only half the recommended serves of fruits and vegetables per day. One in four adolescents buys unhealthy takeaway food every day or even a few times a day. If you eat takeaway food regularly, you are more likely to put on weight than if you eat fast food only occasionally.

Don't despair! It doesn't take a lot of effort to change your eating habits. A few simple changes will make a huge difference. You'll feel better, manage your weight and even save money!

Junk food is poor fuel for your body

About nine in 10 teenagers eat junk food every day. This might be fizzy drinks and high-kilojoule snacks like potato chips. However, your body can't run properly on inferior 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 these tips:

- Cut back on fizzy sugary drinks. Go for sugar-free versions. Even better, drink water instead – try adding a slice of lemon, lime or orange.
- 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 fortified breakfast cereal 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 leaves a limp burger or soggy chips for dead.
- Try different 'fast' options like wholewheat breakfast cereal, muesli, wholemeal bread, wholegrain muffins, fruit, yoghurt or noodles.
- 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. The Better Health Channel recipe finder may provide inspiration.

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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