



PEN Notes: Fact Sheet #28

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Habits for Better Health and Wellness

Adolescence is a time for young people to prepare for a healthy adult life. During adolescence, nutritional problems that started earlier in life can possibly be corrected, and current nutritional problems can be dealt with. Adolescence is also a good time to start healthy eating and other healthy lifestyle behaviors. By doing this, nutrition-related chronic diseases in adulthood (such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, etc.) might be prevented or at least delayed.

Adolescents typically have fewer infections compared with younger children and fewer chronic diseases compared with older people. Because of this, they have generally been given little health and nutrition attention. However, there are nutritional issues, which are adolescent-specific, and which call for specific strategies and approaches.

“Poor eating habits and inactive lifestyles are more common in children today than in the past two decades. The percentage of overweight children aged 6–11 years has more than doubled in the past 20 years. Among adolescents aged 12–19, the figure has more than tripled.”

(Source: Journal of the American Medical Association, 2002, 2004)

What can parents do to help their children form good eating habits?

- Serve at least a total of five fruits and vegetables a day.
- Let children snack on healthy foods and less junk food and sweets.
- Serve at least three low-fat dairy foods a day.
- Have children drink at least two glasses or bottles of water a day.
- Reduce the number of soft drinks allowed per day.



- Eat smaller amounts—do not supersize!
- Eat fast food less often (no more than two times a week).
- Make healthier fast food choices like salads, low-carb wraps, etc.
- Keep total daily fat intake between 25 to 35 percent of calories.
- Gather the family together for at least one sit-down meal a day.

What can schools do to help students form better eating habits?

- Serve foods high in nutrients including whole grain products and fiber-rich fruits and vegetables.
- Offer several choices of foods high in nutrients that appeal to students.
- Serve foods and beverages that are low in trans and saturated fats, sodium, and sugar.
- Serve modest portion sizes, age-appropriate for elementary, middle, and high school students.
- Restrict or eliminate access to sodas, candy, chips, and other junk-food snacks.
- Reinforce the importance of healthy food choices in health and physical education classes.

Children and adolescents should participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity most days of the week, or if at all possible, every day. Children and adolescents should choose any type of medium or higher energy physical activity, such as brisk walking, playing tag, jumping rope, or swimming, as long as it adds up to at least one hour a day.

For children and adolescents, regular physical activity has beneficial effects on the following aspects of health:

- Weight
- Muscular strength
- Cardiorespiratory (aerobic) fitness
- Bone mass (through weight-bearing physical activities)
- Blood pressure (for hypertensive youth)
- Anxiety and stress
- Self-esteem



Children and adolescents who are just beginning to be physically active should start out slowly to prevent the risk of injury or to keep from feeling defeated by impossible goals. Little by little, they can build to higher levels. It is important that children and adolescents are encouraged to be physically active by doing things that interest them. This will help them establish an active lifestyle early on. (Source: [Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005](#).)

What can parents do to help their children form good physical activity habits?

As a parent, you have an important role in shaping your children's physical activity attitudes and behaviors. Here are some tips to encourage your children to be more physically active.

- Set a positive example by leading an active lifestyle yourself.
- Make physical activity part of your family's daily routine by setting aside time for family walks or playing active games together.
- Provide opportunities for children to be active by playing with them. Give them active toys and equipment, and take them to places like the park where they can be active.
- Make physical activity fun. Fun activities can be anything the child enjoys, either structured or non-structured. They may range from team sports, individual sports, and/or recreational activities such as walking, running, skating, bicycling, swimming, playground activities, and free-time play.
- Make sure that the activity is age-appropriate and provide protective equipment such as helmets, wrist pads, and kneepads.
- Limit the time your children watch television or play video games to no more than two hours per day. Instead, encourage your children to find fun activities to do with family members or on their own that simply involve more activity (walking, playing chase, dancing). (Source: Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion)

What can schools do to help students form good physical activity habits?

- Make physical activity part of the school's daily plan by scheduling time for recess and physical education classes.
- Offer opportunities for children to be active. Provide them with playground equipment, and plenty of safe space (fenced, supervised, grass or sand) so they can run and play.
- Make physical activity fun, structured or non-structured, individual or group play.