

SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT TEENS EAT, WHAT THEY NEED



PARENT FACT SHEET

Teens (and preteens who are young adolescents from age 11 to 13) are at a point in life when much is changing. They want to grow up, need to belong, and need responsible guidance and support to help them learn life skills that will be useful now and in the future. Teens and preteens have a wide range of physical, emotional, social, and psychological development. They may be mature in social skills and still be physically immature, or vice versa.

What is on their plate?

Teens know the basics of healthful eating. They're familiar with the food groups and the kinds of foods they need to eat. Yet, many teens can improve their food choices:

- Many do not consume enough fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and calcium-rich foods.
- Many drink too many sugary drinks, and they are short on calcium-rich foods and drinks.
- Most teens need to eat foods that are lower in sugar and fat, especially saturated fat.

Encourage teens to eat the amounts and kinds of foods from the five MyPyramid food groups.

Teens need to eat foods containing calcium, iron, and fiber routinely.

Choose all kinds of foods: get enough of some, but not too much of others

Growing teens need enough nutrients and food energy (calories) for growth, being physically active, and overall health. Encourage them to get a variety of foods from the food groups. (For specific amounts, go to MyPyramid.gov). To satisfy their hunger, they can select extra amounts from the food groups.

Lower fat foods and those with little sugar are better food choices for almost everyone.

It is also wise to eat foods high in calories less often. Or, eat them in smaller amounts. Reading the Nutrition Facts label is important. Paying special attention to the types of fats, particularly saturated fat and *Trans* fats, can make a difference in life-long health. Since the energy needs of teens vary greatly, some active teens and those who may be underweight may benefit from eating additional amounts of foods from all the food groups considering the extra amounts and types of food allowed for higher activity levels. Here are some examples of MyPyramid guidance for the amounts and types of foods per day, at different calorie levels:

MyPyramid Food Groups	1,600 calories	2,000 calories	3,000 calories
Fruits	1½ cups	2 cups	2½ cups
Vegetables	2 cups	2½ cups	4 cups
Milk	3 cups	3 cups	3 cups
Meat and Beans	5 ounces	5½ ounces	7 ounces
Grains	5 ounces	6 ounces	10 ounces

Healthful Eating— a Positive Approach



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Teens may believe that most nutrition advice begins with "you can't" or "you shouldn't." Help them make nutrient-dense food choices. Consider your own words and actions. And, catch teens doing something right!

- Eating is one of life's great pleasures.
- A healthful eating style balances food choices over time.
- All foods can fit into a healthful eating style.



Tips for Parents:

When talking with your teen, explain that body changes are perfectly normal and that his or her body needs healthful food choices to do its best work.

Their Weight:

Adolescent bodies are programmed for growth. Before they start their growth spurt, some preteens gain weight. They plump out before they shoot up. With a balanced, moderate eating plan and active living, their height can eventually catch up with their weight. Adolescents need reassurance that weight gain at this time is a normal part of growth.

Tips for Parents:

Adults can help teens most by appreciating differences. Encourage teens to be active and care for themselves. Good health messages and esteem-building experiences are the best ways to motivate teens to care about themselves and their bodies. For growing teens, there is a broad range of what is healthy. Encourage your teen to ask questions and share his or her concerns with you, another trusted adult, or the school nurse or health professional. Offer positive messages on body size and shape for all teens.

Concerns About Weight:

When it comes to body weight, teens view their bodies differently. Many teens have misconceptions about their size and weight. Girls are more likely to be dissatisfied; they often want a thinner shape. Some heavier girls more often point out the positive aspects of their bodies at larger sizes. There are risks associated with being inactive and overweight, but it is not always clear when a teen is at risk for being overweight or how much weight poses health risks.

Very low-calorie diets are not advised for teens during their growth spurt years. Dieting during early adolescence, age 9–14, may result in higher weights after the teen years than teens who did not diet¹. Adolescents who are concerned about their weight need to talk with their doctor, school nurse, or other health care provider.



Tips for Parents:

Again, good health messages provide the best ways to motivate teens to care about themselves and their bodies. Encourage your teen to talk with you about his or her concerns, or the school nurse or other health professional. Offer positive messages on body sizes and shapes for all teens.

Discourage teens from counting calories. It is difficult to precisely count calories for a day. Teens need to develop skills in using the Nutrition Facts label to make choices between foods, and in choosing the kinds and amounts of foods recommended by the MyPyramid Guidance System.

If you want more information about the psycho-social aspects of weight issues for teens, or how the Body Mass Index applies to growing teens, see FNS' *The Power of Choice: Helping Youth Make Healthy Eating and Fitness Decisions* (2003). Weight-related issues are covered. Go to: teamnutrition.usda.gov for full-text versions of this publication.

¹ Relation Between Dieting and Weight Change Among Preadolescents and Adolescents. Field et al, *Pediatrics*, Vol. 112, # 4, Oct 2003, p. 900-906.

Active Living: What They Do, What They Need



PARENT FACT SHEET

Physical activity—an important part of a healthier lifestyle.

For people of all ages, physical activity promotes health. There are many great reasons to be active. Share these reasons to get up and move!

Being physically active helps teens:

- Feel good and look their personal best.
- Have fun with their friends and family!
- Grow into their bodies, especially during awkward growth periods. It helps them get used to how their bodies work and how they are changing.
- Keep their bodies flexible, muscles and bones strong, and physical endurance higher.
- Reduce their body fat. For many, however, weight problems are more complex than just being inactive.
- Improve their self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-control.
- Improve their heart health, and reduce the risk of some health problems, such as heart disease, as they get older.
- Cope with stress and mild depression, and feel more relaxed.

Teens on the move: keep it up!

Fortunately, most preteens are active as they enter puberty. However, as they move into the teen years, many slow down. Encourage teens to keep up their level of physical activity—not just now but beyond their teen years. Being busy does not mean being physically active. They need to move!

Stop sitting—get moving!

How much physical activity is enough? Children and adolescents need to get at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day, or on most days. Teens do not need to exercise or be athletes to be physically active. Encourage an active lifestyle that includes walking, using stairs, and other activities. Just by spending less time sitting (watching TV and playing computer games), many teens fit more physical activities into their lives.

Tips for Parents:

Encourage teens to enjoy being physically active, rather than working out or exercising. Suggest less sitting and more moving around as a big step toward healthier living! Promote physical activity in fun, everyday ways.

