

Junk the junk food

Clean up your teen's diet in 10 steps

By SHARON MACGREGOR

When children are young, they are rarely out of our sight or control so we, as parents, are responsible for their nutrition. But, as our children mature and begin to make choices for themselves, they may not always make the best decisions about their diet, reaching for sugary, processed foods more often than healthier alternatives. Improving nutrition now, even if your teen is not overweight or obese, can help them avoid being overweight as adults and avoid other weight- and health-related issues such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease (including high blood pressure and high cholesterol).

According to the Centers for Disease Control, the prevalence of overweight, defined as any weight in excess of the ideal range, has more than tripled among those ages 12-19 years. The CDC also states that according to 1999-2000 data, the percentage of teens who are overweight tripled within 20 years, totaling almost 9 million children. And another 15 percent of children and teens ages 6-19 are at risk of becoming overweight. Obesity can be defined as an excessive accumulation of body fat, which results in individuals being at least 20 percent heavier than their ideal body weight.

Even with alarming statistics regarding obesity and overweight teens, parents may think their child is safe



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Get teens involved in the kitchen

Stacey Hawkins, creator of Hudson Valley-based Time Savor Gourmet (timesavorgourmet.com), says getting kids involved in the kitchen is the first step toward making them more responsible for what they eat. "For many teenagers you may find that the primary issues is NOT the food, rather the control over the issues surrounding the food. In this case, involving teens in the food buying and decision making process gives them a sense of power and ultimately control over their own diet. They're much more likely to eat what they make rather than feeling force-fed something they had no say over."

Hawkins suggests getting teens involved in the grocery shopping process, as well. "Let them make some of their favorite foods like tacos or fajitas, home-make baked chicken fingers or pasta with fresh tomato sauce," she says. By using simple, easy-to-follow recipes allows teens to actually prepare a meal for the family, learning not only good eating habits, but important life-skills they will need for the future.

if they are within a normal weight range. Unfortunately, weight is not the only issue. Teens are not tested as often as adults for high cholesterol and their numbers are not always within a healthy range. That's why cleaning up your teen's diet is crucial for his future health.

Ilyse Simon, RD, CDN, a Kingston nutritionist specializing in eating disorders, says the number one problem in a teen diet is balance. "Teens are notorious for skipping lunch. I also see a trend of teenage girls who don't eat lunch at school due to some type of perceived peer pressure. The average teen diet lacks consistency in quality food spread throughout the entire day. We've all heard it for years, and it is true that breakfast is the most important meal. It starts our metabolism and ends the night-long fasting. It gives our bodies the energy to begin a day at school."

"Both snacking and overall meal choices are equally problematic in a teen diet," says Stuart Tashman, MD, FAAP of Hudson Valley Pediatrics in Middletown. From an early age children are bombarded with

commercials and advertisements for sugar-laden or fatty junk foods. Parents, schools and restaurants often offer a wider and far less healthy selection of foods. If you look around your local mall, grocery store or teen hot spot, you will easily see why teens still need help and support to eat healthier.

But, it's never too late to clean up your teen's diet. Here are a few things you can do *now*.

1. Limit the amount of sugary or salty snacks available at home. It is difficult to tell a child he cannot have food that is readily available to everyone else in the home. Having a few cookies or pretzels once a week is observing moderation, and even these treats may be made with multi-grains or organic ingredients that increase the nutritional value of the snack. Prohibiting all salt or sugar may not be the practical solution, but moderation and information regarding healthier choices may be key to improving overall healthy choices.

"Many teens eat on the go, snack in front of a computer screen or the TV, as well as munch nonstop on

snacks from the time they come home from school until it's time for bed," explains Dr. Tashman. "There are a lot of extra calories from added sugar and fat in fast food and poor snacking choices, such as chips or cookies."

2. Offer a wide variety of fresh produce. Parents may unconsciously limit the selection of fruits and vegetables based on their own preferences and dislikes. Introduce new items in small quantities to allow your teen to determine for herself if she likes or dislikes kiwi or brussels sprouts without your influence. Retry it yourself; prepare it in a different manner, try it raw or grilled and maybe you will change your mind. A child who used to turn up his nose at all things green may discover he loves it raw or dipped in something. If a child doesn't seem interested in vine ripe tomatoes, try the smaller grape or cherry sizes. Experiment and play with food.

If you have a difficult time getting your teen to eat those dreaded vegetables, try some recipes in *The Sneaky Chef* cookbook by Missy Chase Lapine. Tasty recipes combine healthy ingredients in everyday dishes that kids will never suspect are good for them.

3. Make healthy snacks convenient. As soon as the produce enters the house, prepare and package it, if possible, into snack-size portions and containers. A hungry, on-the-go teen wants to rip open a plastic bag or container, and eat. If kids have to peel a carrot or cut up celery sticks, these are not choices they are likely to make. It may not be practical, financially feasible or available to buy all types of produce in pre-cut or peeled packages, but peeling and cutting can become the rotating tasks of any household member as soon as the items are brought to the kitchen with you as sous-chef supervisor.

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TEEN DIETS

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"Convenience is certainly a priority for a hungry teen after school. Again, by keeping the house stocked with quick, easy healthy snack choices such as fruit (any kind, dried, frozen, canned, fresh), string cheese, yogurt, frozen fruit bars, popcorn - a teen can make healthier choices," Tashman says.

He advises, "Granola bars and apples fit nicely in backpacks or purses for teens on the go. Brown bagging a lunch can also prevent a teen from making a poor choice at lunchtime. Be careful when choosing protein bars, as they, too, have lots of hidden calories. Aim for high fiber, low fat choices when choosing a snack."

4. Don't forget dairy and protein choices. Yogurt, cheese, cream cheese, and sour cream dips can be included in limited portions. Peanut butter and nuts should also be available. These items can be used in combination with produce to create well balanced and flavor enhanced snacks.

"Protein is important for teens because it's the food they need for healthy growth and development. A diet balanced in protein, carbohydrates, and healthy fats gives kids the lasting energy they need. For example, having eggs and toast for breakfast may help some teens concentrate better for morning classes, whereas skipping breakfast or grabbing a sugary bowl of cereal might send them on a sugar crash sometime around third period," adds Simon.

5. Get creative with ingredients. Create your own trail mix with proportions that fit your teen's tastes. More raisins, a few dried cranberries or blueberries, less or no peanuts in your own mixture also allow custom blends for food allergies.

6. Educate your teen. This generation loves instant access to information on the Internet. When thinking of going to a fast food or chain restaurant, have your teen look up the nutrition information online at the restaurant website. They can decide in advance what healthy options are available rather than ordering based on a craving or the appeal of a menu photo.

7. End breakfast battles. This meal may be the toughest battle because many simply refuse to eat it. But, if you have the correct weapons on hand, good choices can be made. Cereal is an option, but

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you have to read the label. Whole grains, high fiber and low sugar are the first items to look for. Read labels for instant oatmeal, granola or cereal bars, and frozen breakfast choices. Upgrade from regular muffins or bagels to multigrain muffins and other baked goods.

8. What is everyone drinking? A daily soda? Sports drinks? Caffeine? Water or water flavored with fruit at home may be the best choices, but if your child insists on a bottle option, read the label and check for sugars and artificial flavors. These are empty calories and can also cause tooth decay.

"The best beverage choices for teens are water and low fat or fat free milk," adds Dr. Tashman. "Unfortunately, soda, trendy coffee drinks like lattes, and other sugary drinks have become the drink of choice for teens, as well as adults. These drinks are more like desserts, high in calories and added sugar.

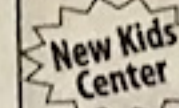
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They definitely contribute to weight gain in teens.”

Simon agrees and offers even more facts. “Soda is the number one item that could be eliminated from an adolescent diet. If teens switched from drinking fluids filled with non-nutritive calories and changed to drinking water it would make a big difference. If a teen drinks a 16-ounce soda at lunch, a sports drink after school, and some soda with dinner that’s about 200 calories per 16 ounces of soda, 260 for an energy drink, and another 200 for soda at dinner. If we were to include one frappuccino on the way to school – a medium frappuccino is about 380 calories – that’s a total of 1,040 calories just from drinks devoid of any nourishing qualities. If a pound equals 3,500 calories, two 16-ounce bottles of soda each day can easily cause weight gain.”

9. Making healthy choices when away from home is the ultimate goal. Just as parents are trying to prepare teens to be adults in every other arena, nutrition is part of the growing up process. Teens socialize at each other’s homes, at the mall, and at school events – away from the scrutiny of their parents. Yes, they will eat some foods that are not the best choice, but learning how to keep a balanced diet must first be learned at home, then practiced out in the world.

“Of course teens will have fast food, but staying away from the ‘super size’ meals and sodas, and choosing instead salad or grilled chicken, and water or diet sodas, a teen can be making a positive meal choice,” says Dr. Tashman.

10. Be the example. Follow the rules for yourself, and your family should find it easier to fall into step. Eating better foods, watching portion sizes, observing moderation,

and being as educated as possible will all help make for a healthy lifestyle and better nutrition!

“Most households these days have two working parents,” Dr. Tashman states. “These parents are also eating on the run and making unhealthy eating choices. Parents have a strong influence on whether or not their children will become overweight, and it’s not just the genes they pass on. When children grow up in families with bad eating habits, they are more likely to become overweight secondary to modeling unhealthy habits. Parents need to support the teen in adopting healthy eating habits and model positive dietary choices. The whole family needs to embark on a new healthier lifestyle that includes not only making healthy eating choices, but physical exercise, as well.”

To improve a teen’s diet, everyone must act and work together. Dr. Tashman recommends that “as a family, planning weekly menus together and encouraging one another to make healthy choices can be helpful. A parent can involve their teen in grocery shopping, reading labels on food products, and cooking meals as well. The busy schedules of today’s family sometimes make it hard to prepare and eat dinner together, but by keeping the pantry stocked with items such as fruit, vegetables, and whole grain items, healthy choices can be made simple.”

The next time you are pushing that cart through the grocery store and making choices for your child, ask yourself if the item you have selected is the best choice. Remember, the changes you can make will not happen overnight and will take time for the whole family to adapt, but in the end, you can contribute toward saving or extending your child’s life.

Sharon MacGregor is a freelance writer and columnist living in Orange County.

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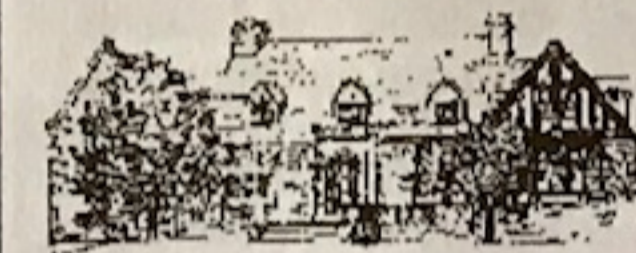
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