

# Helping Your Teenager Make Healthy Food Choices

(11–21 Years)

Teenagers are spending more time and eating more meals away from home. Here are answers to important questions you may have about your teenager's nutrition.

## How can our family eat healthy meals together when we are so busy?

- Make food preparation and cooking a family activity.
- Eat different meals together. For example, eat breakfast together one day and lunch or dinner the next.
- Buy healthy ready-to-eat foods from the store or healthy take-out foods from a restaurant.

## How can I help my teenager get enough calcium?

- Serve foods that are rich in calcium, such as low-fat milk, cheese, yogurt, tofu processed with calcium sulfate, broccoli, and collard and turnip greens.
- Serve flavored milk, such as chocolate or strawberry.
- Use low-fat dairy products in recipes, such as in puddings, milkshakes, soups, and casseroles.
- Serve unusual dairy products, such as new flavors of yogurt.
- If your teenager's digestive system cannot handle milk and other dairy products (she is lactose intolerant), try these suggestions:
  - Serve small portions of these foods throughout the day.
  - Serve these foods along with nondairy foods.
  - Serve lactose-free dairy products, yogurt, and aged hard cheeses, such as Cheddar, Colby, Swiss, and Parmesan, that are low in lactose.
  - Give your teenager lactase tablets before she eats dairy products containing lactose.



- Serve foods, such as orange juice and cereal products, with added calcium (calcium-fortified).
- If these ideas do not work, talk to a health professional about giving your teenager a calcium supplement.

## How can I get my teenager to eat breakfast?

- Provide foods that are fast and convenient, such as bagels, low-fat granola bars, fruits, 100% fruit juice, and yogurt.
- Serve foods other than the usual breakfast foods (for example, sandwiches, baked potatoes, and leftovers such as chicken or pasta).
- Help your teenager get organized so that he has time to eat in the morning.
- Make breakfast the night before.
- If your teenager is in a hurry, offer him foods, such as fruits or trail mix, to eat at school.

## How can I teach my teenager to eat healthy foods away from home?

- Encourage your teenager to buy healthy foods at school, stores, and restaurants, and from vending machines.
- Look at school and restaurant menus with your teenager, and discuss healthy food choices and appropriate portions. Find foods that are low in fat, sugar, and calories.
- Encourage your teenager to eat salads with low-calorie dressings and broiled or baked meats.
- Encourage your teenager to avoid eating fried foods or to reduce serving sizes. For example, suggest that she split an order of French fries with a friend.
- Teach your teenager to ask for changes to make foods healthier, such as asking the server to “hold the mayonnaise.”

## How can I help my teenager like his body?

- Teenagers are very sensitive about how they look. Do not criticize your teenager about his size or shape.
- Focus on traits other than appearance when talking to your teenager.
- Talk to your teenager about how the media affects his body image.
- Be a good role model—don’t criticize your own size or shape or that of others.

## How can I help my teenager be more active?

- Limit the time your teenager spends watching TV and videotapes and playing computer games to 1 or 2 hours per day.
- Encourage your teenager to take a 10-minute physical activity break for every hour she watches TV and videotapes, or plays computer games.

## Notes

- Make physical activity a part of your teenager’s daily life. For example, use the stairs instead of taking an elevator or escalator, and walk or ride a bike instead of riding in or driving a car.
- Encourage your teenager to enroll in planned physical activities, such as swimming, martial arts, or dancing.
- Participate in physical activity together, such as going biking, dancing, or skating. It is a great way to spend time with your teenager.
- Be a good role model—participate in regular physical activity yourself.

## What are common symptoms of eating disorders?

If you notice any of these symptoms, talk to a health professional about your concerns.

### *Anorexia Nervosa*

- Excessive weight loss in a short period of time
- Continuation of dieting although thin
- Dissatisfaction with appearance; belief that body is fat, even though thin
- Loss of menstrual period
- Obsession with physical activity
- Eating in secret
- Depression

### *Bulimia Nervosa*

- Binge-eating with no noticeable weight gain
- Obsession with physical activity
- Disappearance into bathroom for long periods of time (for example, to induce vomiting)
- Vomiting or laxative use
- Unusual interest in certain foods and development of unusual eating rituals
- Depression

## Resources

American Anorexia Bulimia Association  
Phone: (212) 575-6200  
Web site: <http://aabainc.org/home.html>

American Dietetic Association  
Phone: (800) 366-1655  
Web site: <http://www.eatright.org>

USDA Food and Nutrition Information Center  
Phone: (703) 305-2554  
Web site: <http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic>

This fact sheet contains general information and is not a substitute for talking with your teenager’s health professional about your par-