

Teen Nutrition for All the Right Reasons

Most teens are interested in nutrition because they either want to look good or improve their athletic performance. Some are concerned about health, but let's face it, most of us don't think we'll ever get sick. That's just for old people, right? So let's get down to the important stuff that really counts.

Weight. Girls usually want to lose weight, while guys usually want to build more muscle and get taller. The mirror (or your friends) may not be the best way to judge what you should weigh. Girls naturally add some fat as they mature. In fact, if a girl doesn't have at least 17% body fat, she won't have normal periods. That may sound great, but it's not good for her body. For teens, DIET is a four letter word. That doesn't mean you shouldn't clean up your act and get more active and eat better, but starving yourself is bad for your brain, muscle and bones.

In contrast, boys often want to become taller and stronger. Again nature doesn't always cooperate. Boys begin their growth spurt up to two years later than girls. Some as late as age 14 or 15. That's really frustrating because boys don't develop their full muscle mass until a year after they hit their full height. That could be as late as age 20. That can seem like forever, but eating a lot of junk food or drinking high protein drinks isn't going to speed up Old Mother Nature. Boys who overeat just learn bad habits that will make them fat as they get older. And extra protein just gets used for calories and may hurt the kidneys.



The real goal is a **healthy weight**. A healthy weight is what you weigh when you eat a variety of healthy foods and are active every day. Too many teens are so inactive they not only become couch potatoes, but they sometimes get mistaken for the couch. If you sit more than two hours a day in front of the TV or computer, you are likely to be out of shape if not overweight. The real goal is to be fit, not just thin.

So what's the solution? Eat right and get active! This is true whether you are a star athlete or a casual walker. The only difference is the amount you eat.

First, make every drink count. This may sound boring, but soft drinks and alcohol are not where it's at. You are building bone faster now than you ever have. The amount of bone you make now will protect you from bone loss later. You need at least 3-4 cups of skim or reduced fat milk every day. Then drink 4 more cups of water or juice to get enough fluid for your body to function properly. Drink an extra 2 cups of water before an athletic event, and another 4 ounces every half hour while you exercise. On hot days you will need to drink even more. Drink too little fluid and you may end up laying on the playing field instead of playing on it.

Second, eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day. Fruits and vegetables are great sources of vitamins, minerals and fiber and are low in calories. People who eat the most vegetables and fruits stay healthy the longest. One serving is only the size of the palm of a girl's hand, or her fist if it's a piece of fruit or potato, so that really isn't much.

Third, eat more whole grains and cereals. Bread won't make you fat if you don't eat too much. Depending on your size, you need 6 - 11 servings per day. The best choices are fiber-rich whole grain breads, cereals and pasta. Again a girl's palm is about the size of one portion. Eat enough protein but not too much. Most of us eat too much protein. That doesn't mean you should become a vegetarian, but try to eat smaller portions of meat, fish and poultry. Fill up on those veggies and grains.

Finally, watch the junk. You know what that is. Candy, chips, fries - whatever. Make fast foods a special occasion instead of a daily event. When you eat out, go for the grilled chicken, baked potatoes, bean burritos, chili, salad, milk and orange juice.



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