



## Childhood Obesity and Healthy Eating Tips for Staywell Members

### What Is Healthy Eating?

Healthy eating means eating a variety of foods. This gives your child the nutrients he or she needs to grow. A wide variety of basic foods is the key to being well-nourished.

### How Much Food Is Good for My Child?

Kids from birth to 3 years old have an "internal hunger gauge." It tells them how much food they need at a given time. Babies cry to let us know they're hungry. They stop eating when they're full. Children continue this pattern as they grow. They eat as much or as little as their bodies need. But after the age of 2 or 3, this internal hunger gauge may not work as well as before. It is important to get your child to pay attention to what his or her body says. It may worry you to see your child eat very little at a meal. Children tend to eat the same number of calories every day when they can eat in response to their internal hunger gauge. But their eating pattern may change from day to day. One day a child may eat a big breakfast, a big lunch and hardly any dinner. The next day this same child may eat very little at breakfast but may eat a lot at lunch and dinner. Don't expect your child to eat the same amount of food at every meal and snack each day.

### How Can I Help My Child Eat Well and Be Healthy?

You may worry that your child is eating too much or too little. Or maybe your child only wants to eat one type of food—peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, for instance. But it's your job to decide what foods to eat. This is called the division of responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

The division of responsibility is outlined below:

- **Your** job is to offer nutritious food choices at meals and snack times. You decide the **what, where** and **when** of eating.
- **Your child's** job is to choose **how much** he or she will eat of the foods you serve. Your children decide how much or even **whether** to eat.

This idea may be new to you. It may take a little time for both you and your child to adjust. In time, your child will learn that he or she can eat as little or as much as he or she wants. This will encourage your child to continue to trust his or her internal hunger gauge.

Here are some ways you can help support your child's healthy eating habits and physical activity level:

- Eat meals together whenever you can. Make meals a good experience. Don't talk about the amount or type of food your child eats. Pushing a child to eat can make the child resist new or different foods.
- Choose healthy foods. Kids see the choices you make and follow your example.
- Set limits on your child's daily TV and computer time. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than 1 to 2 hours of screen time a day. Sit down with your child. Plan out how he or she will use this time.
- Make activity a part of your family's daily life. Some ways to do this include walking your child to and from school. You can also teach your child how to skip, hop, dance, play catch, jump rope or ride a bike.
- Take a walk after dinner.
- Take your child to all recommended well-child checkups. Talk to a doctor about your child's growth rate, activity level and eating habits.

### What Causes Poor Eating Habits?

There are many reasons kids get poor eating habits. Infants are born liking sweet tastes. But many healthy foods aren't sweet. So babies need to learn to like other tastes.

- **Available food choices.** Most kids will choose candy and soft drinks over more healthy choices. But forbidding these choices can make kids want them even more. You can include some less-nutritious foods as part of your

child's meals so that he or she learns to enjoy them along with other foods. It is your child's job to decide how much of a food he or she will eat at a meal, but it is OK to limit dessert to one serving. It is your responsibility as a parent to decide what foods are offered as well as when and where meals and snacks are offered. Try to keep a variety of nutritious and appealing food choices available. Healthy and kid-friendly snack ideas include:

- o String cheese.
- o Whole wheat crackers and peanut butter.
- o Air-popped or low-fat microwave popcorn.
- o Frozen juice bars made with 100% real fruit.
- o Fruit and dried fruit.
- o Baby carrots with hummus or bean dip.
- o Low-fat yogurt with fresh fruit.

- **The need for personal choice.** Power struggles between a parent and child can affect eating behavior. Kids who are pressured to eat a certain food may then refuse to eat it. Your role is to have a variety of nutritious foods around. Your child's job is to decide what and how much he or she will eat.
- **Emotion.** A child may eat too much or too little at times of sadness, anxiety or a family crisis. The key is to fix the issue causing the problem. Don't focus on the eating.

Your child may be healthy. He or she may eat a good diet yet eat very little. He or she may just need less food energy (calories) than other kids. And some kids just need more daily calories than others. Every child is different in this area.

Sometimes a child may eat more or less than usual because of a medical condition. Does your child have a medical condition that affects how he or she eats? If so, talk with your child's doctor about how your child can get the right amount of nutrition.

## What Are the Risks of Eating Poorly?

A child with poor eating habits is going to be poorly nourished. He or she won't be getting what is needed to grow. This can lead to being underweight or overweight. Poorly nourished kids can get sick more than others. They risk heart disease, high blood pressure or diabetes later in life.

Poor eating habits include:

- Eating a very limited variety of foods.
- Refusing to eat entire groups of foods such as vegetables.
- Eating too much junk food. This includes soft drinks, chips and doughnuts.
- Overeating due to being served large portions or due to a parent saying "clean your plate" or "finish it all up."

## References

Healthwise, Incorporated. Healthy Eating for Children. Author: Caroline Rea, RN, BS, MS. Medical Review: Ruth Page 3 Schneider, MPH, RD (Diet and Nutrition), Joanne P. Ikeda, MA, RD (Nutrition Education Specialist and Lecturer). September 13, 2007.

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