

RJ Ahmann Company Prevention Newsletter



...for the health and well-being of you and your family.

Eating well and being physically active are the keys to your child's well-being. Eating too much and exercising too little can lead to being overweight, and weight-related health problems will likely follow children into their adult years.

You can take an active role in helping your child – and your whole family – learn healthy eating habits and the importance of physical activity.

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The Childhood Obesity Epidemic

How will healthy eating and physical activity help my child?

All children benefit from healthy eating and physical activity. A balanced diet and being physically active helps children to:

- Grow
- Learn
- Build strong bones and muscles
- Have energy
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Avoid obesity-related diseases like type 2 diabetes
- Get plenty of nutrients
- Feel good about themselves.

How are physical activity and eating habits formed?

Parents play a big role in shaping children's eating habits. When parents eat a variety of foods that are low in fat and sugar and high in fiber, children learn to like these foods as well. It may take 10 or more tries before a child accepts a new food, so do not give up if your child does not like a new food right away.

Parents have an effect on children's physical activity habits as well. You can set a good example by going for a walk or bike ride after dinner instead of watching TV. Playing ball or jumping rope with your children shows them that being active is fun.

What should my child eat?

Just like adults, children need to eat a wide variety of foods for good health. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans encourages Americans over 2 years old to eat a variety of nutrient-dense foods. Recommended items include fruits, vegetables, fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products, lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, nuts, and whole grains. The guidelines also suggest a diet low in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.

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How can I help my child eat better?

- Give your child a healthy snack or two (such as dried fruit, air-popped popcorn, or low-fat yogurt) in addition to his/her three daily meals.
- Offer your child a wide variety of foods, such as whole grains and lean meats.
- Keep serving new foods, even if your child resists them at first.
- Cook with less fat – bake, roast, or poach instead of frying.
- Limit the amount of added sugar in your child's diet; choose cereals with low sugar and serve water or low-fat milk instead of sugar-sweetened sodas and fruit juices.
- Choose and prepare foods with less salt – keep the salt shaker off the table and have fruits and vegetables on hand for snacks instead of salty snack foods.
- Involve your child in planning, choosing, and preparing meals. Children are more willing to eat the dishes they help fix.
- Have family meals together and serve everyone the same thing.
- Do not be too strict. In small amounts, sweets or fast-food can still have a place in a healthy diet.
- Make sure your child eats breakfast. It provides him/her with the energy needed to listen and learn in school.

How can I help my child become more physically active?

Like adults, children should be physically active most, if not all, days of the week. Experts suggest at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity daily for most children. Walking fast, bicycling, jumping rope, dancing fast, and playing basketball are all good ways for your child to be active. Other suggestions:

- As children spend more time watching TV and playing video games, they spend less time being active. Parents play a big role in helping kids get moving; be a role model. If they see you being physically active and having fun, they are more likely to be active and stay active throughout their lives.
- Involve the whole family in activities such as hiking, dancing, baseball or rollerblading.
- Focus on fun – you can do a lot of walking during trips to the zoo, mall, or park.
- Include children in household activities like dog walking, car washing or yard work.
- Limit your children's TV and computer time. Offer them active options, like joining a recreation center or after-school program, or taking lessons in a sport they enjoy.
- Encourage your child to be physically active every day.

How can I help my overweight child?

Children who are overweight are more likely to become overweight adults. They may develop type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and other illnesses that can follow them into adulthood. Being overweight can also lead to stress, sadness, and low self-esteem.

Because children grow at different rates at different times, it is not always easy to tell if a child is overweight. For example, it is normal for boys to have a growth spurt in weight and catch up in height later. Your health care provider can tell you if your child is in a healthy range. If your physician finds that your child is overweight, you can help:

- Do not put your child on a weight-loss diet unless his/her physician tells you to. Limiting what children eat may interfere with their growth.
- Involve the whole family in building healthy eating and physical activity habits. It benefits everyone and does not single out the overweight child.
- Accept and love your child at any weight. It will boost his/her self-esteem.
- Help your child find ways other than eating to handle setbacks or successes.

Talk with your healthcare provider if you are concerned about your child's eating habits or weight. Remember, you play the biggest role in your child's life. You can help your children learn healthy habits that they can follow for the rest of their lives.

Source: National Institutes of Health, www.nih.gov