

# Adolescent Nutrition: What Parents Need To Know

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American teens are not eating well. Fast-food, over-sized bagged snack foods, high-sugar and high-caffeine "energy" drinks, and sweets and treats make up the bulk of teen diets.

Good nutrition is as important for teenagers as for any other pediatric age group. Good nutrition supports the development of healthy lifestyles, helps prevent weight-related problems, reduces long-term disease risk, and ensures that all needs are met for growth and development. Rapid physical growth during adolescence creates a high demand for energy and certain nutrients, especially calcium and iron.

In balance with adequate physical activity, healthy dietary choices help to prevent excess weight gain, iron deficiency anemia, and poor bone mineralization, all problems that are occurring much too often in American teens. Adolescent overweight or obesity is now the norm, and shocking numbers of teens and young adults are being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.

Most teens are not getting enough exercise, primarily because they are tethered for many hours per day to their various forms of electronica. Very few teens (2%) are eating enough, if any, fruits and vegetables. And three-quarters of adolescents are not getting enough calcium in their diets. All this adds up to a near future of very unhealthy young adults.

So what can teens do about their atrocious diets?

- Cut back sweetened beverages (soda, fruit teas, energy drinks, vitamin water, sports drinks) to no more than once weekly. Replace such drinks with water, or low-fat milk.
- Average at least 8 hours of sleep at night. Rested individuals eat less during the day. Sleep-deprived individuals tend to drink more high-calorie, high-caffeine "energy drinks".
- Increase consumption of fruits and vegetables. Five servings each day in combination! Fruit juice does NOT count as a fruit, nor do fruit snacks!
- Replace the majority of refined grains (white bread, white pasta) in the diet with whole-grain products (whole wheat bread and pasta, whole grain cereals, unbuttered popcorn, whole wheat pretzels etc.).
- Increase calcium intake (3 servings each day of low-fat dairy products). See the "Calcium" handout on our website for a list of more calcium-rich foods.
- Take a daily supplement containing 400 IU of Vitamin D. A daily multi-vitamin is a good idea, as well.
- Limit fast-food to no more than twice *monthly*.
- Pack a school lunch, rather than buy the hot lunch, or go off-campus for fast-food.
- Exercise for at least 30 minutes 5 days a week. And,
- Limit non-school work related screen time (video games, television, computers) to a maximum of 2 hours daily. And get the TV out of the bedroom!