

Good Health Begins At Home

Dr. Todd Huffman, for the Eugene *Register-Guard*, July 2009

Good health is a family affair. While a child's health is certainly influenced by others, no matter the setting, the responsibility for assuring a healthy lifestyle belongs to the parents.

A child's home must be a safe haven for healthy lifestyle practices. Here are some ways to start:

Read it before eating it! Learn how to read nutrition labels. Consider taking a nutrition class. Look first at the serving size; knowing what constitutes a serving must be the starting point. Look also at the calories, at the saturated fat content, and at the percentage of calories that come from fat.

Get the junk food out! Cookies, donuts, potato chips, candy, ice cream...if they're not available, kids are less likely to ask for them. Dessert should be no more than once weekly. Make dessert a scheduled event, such as Saturday Night Treat Night, so that the kids learn not to ask for dessert on other days.

Eat real vegetables! Potatoes don't count. Corn and peas barely count. Did you know that one-quarter of all vegetables eaten in the U.S. are French fries or chips? Make certain a non-potato vegetable is present at every lunch and dinner.

Five fruits or vegetables a day! Fruits and vegetables are okay anytime for snacking. Keep a drawer full in the fridge. Whole fruits and vegetables are high in nutrients and low in calories.

Get the soda pop out! We drink it like water, but it's not. Sugar-sweetened carbonated soft drinks are no more than liquid candy. These nutrient-empty drinks give children unnecessary sugar, caffeine, and calories while increasing the risk of being overweight, of tooth decay, and of weaker bones. Letting kids enjoy a rare treat of soda when out to eat is okay, but no more.

Fruit juices do not equal real fruit! Juices such as 100 percent apple juice or grape juice are virtually empty in nutrients, and as high or higher in calories as soda. Buy only 100 percent orange juice or grapefruit juice, and limit your child to 6 ounces per day, such as with breakfast.

Eat at predictable times! Children thrive on routine. Children eat more when unsure when the next meal or snack time is.

Watch the snacking! Children under age 5 years need two healthy snacks per day. Children over 5 years should only have a healthy after-school snack. Protein-rich low-calorie snacks are the best choices, as are fruits and vegetables. Keep the kids busy, because boredom equals hunger.

Eat at the table, not in front of the television! Families that eat together have lower rates of obesity and drug use in children and teens. Eating alone equals eating more. And when we roam with food, or eat in front of the television, we eat worse foods and more of them.

No more Clean Plate Rangers! Do not make your children eat when they are not hungry. This only teaches them not to listen to their bodies, a great way to eventually make them overweight or obese.

No making separate meals! The parent's job is to prepare a healthy, balanced meal. It is the child's job to decide whether or not to eat it. If they turn up their noses, excuse them from the table. But if they're hungry later, reheat their dinner and offer it again. Never make a separate meal! However, the child should always be allowed to substitute fruits and vegetables.

Eat a healthy breakfast! Children who eat a healthy breakfast, such as Cheerios in 1% milk with a piece of fruit, or two tablespoons of peanut butter on whole wheat toast, have lower risks of overweight and obesity, and less impulsive snacking before lunch.

Reduce the omega-6-fats! These are essential fatty acids, but we eat too much of them. They are found in corn, soybeans, and sunflower oils, all common to pre-processed meals and snack foods. These oils attach to receptors in the brain to cause lethargy and the "munchies"! When oil is needed, use monounsaturated oils, such as olive and canola oil, or the specially-made "high oleic acid" versions of saffron oil, sunflower oil, and peanut oil.

Increase the omega-3-fats! These fats are proven to be good for the brain and heart, and to protect against obesity when eating an otherwise healthy diet. The best sources of these fats are Alaskan or Pacific salmon, and wild or farmed trout. Grass-fed beef is also a good source. Taking a daily supplement of 400mg EPA with 200mg DHA every day can be beneficial if your child dislikes seafood.

Get outside and get some sun! Kids eat less when they're busy, and they burn more calories. Fifteen minutes of sunlight a week allows for good production of Vitamin D which, besides helping to make strong bones, also improves mood. And we feel better, we eat less.

Exercise regularly! Exercise benefits not only the body, but also the brain. Besides reducing weight gain, exercise improves the ability to sit still and focus, and reduces the risk of depression and anxiety. Children need at least 30 minutes of heart-rate-increasing activity at least 3 times a week.

Get enough sleep! Children need more sleep than do adults. The average American child gets 1 to 2 hours less per night than they need. More sleep is associated with less weight gain, by helping to achieve hormone balance that promotes burning rather than storing energy when awake. More sleep helps at school, too!

And, finally, **Limit screen time!** The average child sits in front of some sort of screen almost 5 hours daily. There is a clear correlation between screen time and overweight and obesity. Limit your child's screen time to no more than an average of two hours per day. Purchase a kitchen timer if necessary to keep track of the time.