

*Healthy Eating & Physical Activity Across Your Lifespan*

# Helping Your Child

## Tips for Parents

 **NIDDK** *Weight Control Information Network*

Eating well and being physically active are key to your child's well-being. Eating too much and exercising too little can lead to overweight and related health problems that can follow children into their adult years. You can take an active role in helping your child—and your whole family—learn healthy eating and physical activity habits.

### 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 help children:

- 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 my child's eating and activity 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.

With many parents working outside the home, child care providers also help shape children's eating and activity habits. Make sure your child care provider offers well-balanced meals and snacks, as well as plenty of active play time.

If your child is in school, find out more about the school's breakfast and lunch programs and ask to have input into menu choices, or help your child pack a lunch that includes a variety of foods. Get involved in the parent-teacher association—PTA—to support physical education and after-school sports.

Your child's friends and the media can also affect his or her eating and activity choices. Children may go to fast food places or play video games with their friends instead of playing tag, basketball, or other active games. TV commercials try to persuade kids to choose high-fat snacks and high-sugar drinks and cereals. When parents help their children be aware of peer and media pressures, youngsters are more likely to make healthy choices outside the home.

### What should my child eat?

Just like adults, children need to eat a wide variety of foods for good health.

In January 2005, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) jointly released the 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. These new guidelines outline recommendations to promote health and reduce the risk of chronic disease through nutritious eating and physical activity.

The new guidelines encourage Americans over 2 years of age 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 recommend a diet low in saturated fats, *trans* fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.

\*For more information about recommended daily intakes from various food groups, visit [www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines](http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines).



## Sources of Calcium

Calcium helps build strong bones and teeth. Milk and milk products are great sources of calcium. If your child cannot digest milk or if you choose not to serve milk products, there are other ways to make sure he or she gets enough calcium.

- Serve calcium-rich vegetables like broccoli, mustard greens, kale, collard greens, and brussels sprouts.
- Include high-calcium beans like great northern beans, black turtle beans, navy beans, and baked beans in casseroles and salads.
- Try calcium-enriched soy- and rice-based drinks. Serve chilled, use in place of cow's milk in your favorite recipes, or add to hot or cold cereals.
- Serve lactose-reduced or lactose-free dairy products like low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt, and ice cream. (Lactose is the sugar in milk and foods made with milk. People who cannot digest lactose often have stomach pain and bloating when they drink milk.)
- Try low-fat yogurt or cheese in small amounts—they may be easier to digest than milk.

## How can I help my child eat better?

- Give your child a snack or two in addition to his or her three daily meals.
- Offer your child a wide variety of foods, such as grains, vegetables and fruits, low-fat dairy products, and lean meat or beans.
- Serve snacks like dried fruit, low-fat yogurt, and air-popped popcorn.
- Let your child decide whether and how much to eat. Keep serving new foods even if your child does not eat them at first.
- Cook with less fat—bake, roast, or poach foods instead of frying.
- Limit the amount of added sugar in your child's diet. Choose cereals with low or no added sugar. Serve water or low-fat milk more often than sugar-sweetened sodas and fruit-flavored drinks.
- Choose and prepare foods with less salt. Keep the salt shaker off the table. Have fruits and vegetables on hand for snacks instead of salty snack foods.
- Involve your child in planning and preparing meals. Children may be 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 food from fast-food restaurants can still have a place in a healthy diet.
- Make sure your child eats breakfast. Breakfast provides children with the energy they need to listen and learn in school.



## Simple Snack Ideas\*

- Dried fruit and nut mix
- Fresh, frozen, or canned vegetables or fruit served plain or with low-fat yogurt
- Rice cakes, whole-grain crackers, or whole-grain bread served with low-fat cheese, fruit spread, peanut butter, almond butter, or soy nut butter
- Pretzels or air-popped popcorn sprinkled with salt-free seasoning mix
- Homemade fruit smoothie made with low-fat milk or yogurt and frozen or fresh fruit
- Dry cereals served plain or with low-fat or fat-free milk

*\*Children of preschool age and younger can easily choke on foods that are hard to chew, small and round, or sticky, such as hard vegetables, whole grapes, hard chunks of cheese, raisins, nuts and seeds, and popcorn. Carefully select snacks for children in this age group.*

## What about physical activity?

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.

As children spend more time watching TV and playing computer and video games, they spend less time being active. Parents play a big role in helping kids get up and get moving.

- How can I help my child be more active?  
Be a role model for your children. 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 like hiking, biking, dancing, basketball, or roller skating.
- Focus on fun. You can do a lot of walking during trips to the zoo, park, or miniature-golf course.
- Include children in household activities like dog-walking, car-washing, or lawn-mowing.
- Limit your children's TV and computer time. Offer them active options, like joining a local recreation center or after-school program, or taking lessons in a sport they enjoy.
- Encourage your child to be physically active every day.

## What if my child is overweight?

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. Overweight in children 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 measure your child's height and weight and tell you if your child is in a healthy range for his or her gender and age. If your provider finds that your child is overweight, you can help.

## How can I help my overweight child?

- Do not put your child on a weight-loss diet unless your health care provider 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 child who is overweight.
- Accept and love your child at any weight. It will boost his or her self-esteem.
- Help your child find ways other than food to handle setbacks or successes.
- Talk with your health care 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 eating and physical activity habits that they can follow for the rest of their lives.

## Tips for Parents

- Make sure your child eats breakfast. Breakfast provides children with the energy they need to listen and learn in school.
- Offer your child a wide variety of foods, such as grains, vegetables and fruits, low-fat dairy products, and lean meats or beans.
- Talk to your health care provider if you are concerned about your child's eating habits or weight.
- Cook with less fat—bake, roast, or poach foods instead of frying.
- Limit the amount of added sugar in your child's diet. Serve water or low-fat milk more often than sugar-sweetened sodas and fruit-flavored drinks.
- Involve your child in planning and preparing meals. Children may be more willing to eat the dishes they help fix.
- Be a role model for your children. If they see you being physically active and having fun, they are more likely to be active and stay active throughout their lives.
- Encourage your child to be active every day.
- Involve the whole family in activities like hiking, biking, dancing, basketball, or roller skating.

## Additional Reading

*Dietary Guidelines for Americans.* USDA and DHHS, 2005. [www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines](http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines)

**The American Academy of Pediatrics**  
141 Northwest Point Boulevard  
Elk Grove Village, IL 60007-1098  
Phone: (847) 434-4000 or 1-888-227-1770  
Internet: [www.aap.org/parents.html](http://www.aap.org/parents.html)

**The American Dietetic Association**  
120 South Riverside Plaza  
Suite 2000  
Chicago, IL 60606-6995  
Toll-free number: 1-800-877-1600  
Internet: [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)

**Food and Nutrition Information Center**  
USDA  
Agricultural Research Service  
National Agricultural Library  
Room 105  
10301 Baltimore Avenue  
Beltsville, MD 20705-2351  
Phone: (301) 504-5719  
Internet: [www.nal.usda.gov/fnic](http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic)

**International Food Information Council**  
1100 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Suite 430  
Washington, DC 20036-4120  
Phone: (202) 296-6540  
Internet: <http://ific.org>

**The National Network for Child Care**  
Internet: [www.nncc.org](http://www.nncc.org)

**President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports**  
Department W  
2000 Independence Avenue, SW  
Room 738-H  
Washington, DC 20201-0004  
Phone: (202) 690-9000  
Internet: [www.fitness.gov](http://www.fitness.gov)

**WeCan! Ways to Enhance Children's Activity and Nutrition**  
Toll-free number: 1-866-359-3226  
Internet: [wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov)

**Weight-control Information Network:**  
1 WIN Way  
Bethesda, MD 20892-3665  
Phone: (202) 828-1025  
FAX: (202) 828-1028  
Toll-free number: 1-877-946-4627  
Email: [WIN@info.niddk.nih.gov](mailto:WIN@info.niddk.nih.gov)

*Inclusion of resources is for information only and does not imply endorsement by NIDDK or WIN.*

## Weight-control Information Network

1 WIN Way  
Bethesda, MD 20892-3665  
Phone: (202) 828-1025  
FAX: (202) 828-1028  
Toll-free number: 1-877-946-4627  
Email: [win@info.niddk.nih.gov](mailto:win@info.niddk.nih.gov)

The Weight-control Information Network (WIN) is a national information service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) of the National Institutes of Health, which is the Federal Government's lead agency responsible for biomedical research on nutrition and obesity. Authorized by Congress (Public Law 103-43), WIN provides the general public, health professionals, the media, and Congress with up-to-date, science-based health information on weight control, obesity, physical activity, and related nutritional issues.

Publications produced by WIN are reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts. This publication was also reviewed by Lisa Kelly, M.P.H., R.D., International Food Information Council.

This publication is not copyrighted. WIN encourages users of this brochure to duplicate and distribute as many copies as desired.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
National Institutes of Health

NIH Publication No. 04-4955  
March 2004  
Updated January 2007

