

Healthy eating habits for teenagers

Key points

- **It's normal for teenagers to feel hungrier and eat more as they begin puberty.**
- **Encourage healthy eating habits by being a good food role model, creating a healthy food environment, and sending healthy food messages.**
- **Unhealthy eating habits include eating too much, not eating enough or following a poorly planned restricted diet.**

Eating and eating habits in teenagers

As teenagers grow and develop, it's **normal for them to feel hungrier and start to eat more**. As your child begins puberty, her body is going through a major growth spurt. Extra food gives her extra energy and nutrients to support this growth.

Your child might also **start changing his eating habits**. For example, it's common for teenagers to start eating fewer fruit and vegies and more fatty and sugary foods. There might be lots of reasons for this. It could be because your child's friends are into convenience or junk foods, because he has his own money to spend on food, or because he wants to test your family values about eating.



When teenagers eat a wide range of foods from the five food groups (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/healthy-lifestyle/daily-food-guides/nutrition-healthy-food-teens>), they get the nutrition they need for health, growth and development.

How to encourage healthy eating habits in teenagers

Role-modelling

Being a positive food role model (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/behaviour/encouraging-good-behaviour/being-a-role-model>) is one of the best ways to reinforce your child's healthy eating habits.

This is about showing your child that healthy eating is important to you. There are lots of ways you can do this – for example, by always eating breakfast and by choosing healthy food options when you're eating away from home or food shopping.

Making time to [enjoy healthy meals as a family](https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/healthy-lifestyle/healthy-eating-habits/family-meals-tips) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/healthy-lifestyle/healthy-eating-habits/family-meals-tips>) is one of the best ways to model healthy habits and increase your child's interest in food and nutrition. It's also a good way to spend family time together catching up on everyone's day.

Creating a healthy food environment

If you have a healthy food environment in your family, it makes it easier for your child to make better choices.

Here are some practical ways you can create a healthy food environment:

- Ask your child to help with your family's food shopping and meal planning.
- Encourage your child to take responsibility for planning and preparing one healthy family meal a week.
- Limit unhealthy food options in your home, and make it easy for your child to find healthy food at home. For example, keep a bowl of fruit on the bench, a container of chopped vegies in the fridge, a loaf of wholegrain bread in the freezer, and a packet of wholegrain crackers in the cupboard.



If your child starts learning to cook some simple healthy meals now, it sets her up to make better food choices in the future. Also, if your child feels she has some say about what's on the menu, she's more likely to eat it.

Talking about food

The way you talk about food has a big effect on your child's eating habits. Try to emphasise all of the good things about healthy eating, instead of focusing on the effects of unhealthy eating.

These ideas might help:

- Avoid restricting foods or describing them as 'good', 'bad', 'naughty' and so on. Instead, **aim for balance** – eat healthy most of the time and every now and again you might like to eat 'sometimes' foods.
- Teach your child to eat when he's hungry and to stop when he's full. This helps him learn to recognise whether he's eating out of true hunger or eating out of boredom or tiredness. But remember that it's normal for your child to eat a lot more while he's growing and developing.
- Talk with your child about how food can help with her concentration, school, sports performance and wellbeing. This can motivate your child to make

healthy choices, and it'll probably mean more to her than information about longer-term health risks.

Risks of unhealthy eating habits in teenagers

Unhealthy eating habits like eating too much, not eating enough, or restricted eating can be bad for your teenage child's health and wellbeing, now and in the future. But with healthy eating habits in adolescence, your child can mostly avoid these risks.

Eating too much

Eating too much food, particularly unhealthy food, puts your child at risk of overweight and obesity (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/mental-health-physical-health/health-concerns/overweight-obesity-in-teens>).

An overweight or obese child is at an increased risk of type-2 diabetes (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/type-2-diabetes>), sleep apnoea (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/sleep-apnoea>) and hip and joint problems. Long-term risks include heart disease and some cancers.

Not eating enough

When teenagers go on fad or crash diets they can be at risk of not eating enough and not getting the nutrients they need for healthy growth and development.

Severe dieting can lead to health and other problems like fatigue, poor concentration and loss of muscle mass and bone density.

In some cases, dieting might even lead to the development of eating disorders (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/mental-health-physical-health/mental-health-disorders-concerns/eating-disorders>) like anorexia (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/anorexia>) and bulimia (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/bulimia>). Some signs and symptoms of an eating disorder include constant or repetitive dieting, binge eating, excessive exercise, food avoidance, repeated weighing and dizziness. If you're worried that your child might be at risk of eating disorders, see your GP or other health professional as soon as possible.

Restricted eating

Your child doesn't need to restrict foods like dairy foods or foods with gluten unless he has a food allergy (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/mental-health-physical-health/allergies-intolerances/food-allergies>) or food intolerance (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/mental-health-physical-health/allergies-intolerances/food-intolerances>) that has been diagnosed by a health professional.

If your child is eating a restricted diet that isn't well-planned and/or supervised by a GP or dietitian, it could lead to nutritional deficiencies and other health problems.

For example, a dairy-free diet over an extended period of time might mean your child isn't getting enough calcium, [vitamin D](https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/healthy-lifestyle/nutrients/vitamin-d) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/healthy-lifestyle/nutrients/vitamin-d>), energy and protein for bone health and peak bone mass.

A poorly planned long-term vegetarian diet can result in your child not getting enough nutrients, especially iron and vitamin B12. This is a particular risk for girls who have started having periods. Both factors increase the risk of iron deficiency and anaemia (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/anaemia>).



If you need some help with your child's nutrition or you're concerned about your child's eating habits and health, you could start by making an appointment with your family GP. Another option is to see an [Accredited Practising Dietitian](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/dietitian) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/dietitian>), in your area.

References

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External links

- [Dietitians Association of Australia \(http://www.daa.asn.au/\)](http://www.daa.asn.au/)

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