

MESSAGE FROM SCHOOL HEALTH NURSE

Teenagers and Food!

“Whilst some of us as parents can’t keep food in the cupboard others are struggling to convince their child to eat a meal at all.”

In adolescence, food is the fuel for lots of growing and developing. This is also the time when your child forms lifelong food habits. You can encourage your child to have a healthy attitude to food during their teenage years.

Nutrition and food basics

Because of the massive physical changes happening in puberty, teenagers have bigger nutrition needs compared both to adults and young people who’ve finished their growth spurts.

Food is the fuel for these physical changes.

Your child’s level of physical activity and stage of development – rather than her age – determines how much energy and protein needed. Most young people have increases in appetite so their bodies can get the extra nutrition they need for growth spurts.

While these physical and nutritional changes are taking place, your child might also be changing his food and eating habits. In fact, teenagers are likely to choose food for reasons not related to nutrition (for example, peer pressure or social activities), and don’t always make the best choices.

If you are feeling concerned about your child’s eating habits, that’s understandable. But there’s a lot you can do to encourage your child to make healthy food choices and develop healthy eating habits.

Key nutrients for teenagers

Your teenager will need extra **calcium** and **iron** during adolescence.

Calcium

To get enough calcium, your child needs dairy foods during adolescence. Enough calcium will help your child to reach peak bone density and build strong bones for life.

Iron

Expanding blood volumes and growing muscle mass means your child needs more iron in adolescence. Girls also have extra iron needs because of their periods. Red meat is one of the richest sources of iron. A vegetarian diet can provide enough iron too, but vegetarians might need to work a bit harder to eat iron-rich alternatives to meat. Good vegetarian sources of iron include green leafy vegetables, legumes (for example, beans and lentils), wholegrains and fortified cereals.

Helping your teenager make healthy food choices

Being a **positive food role model** is one of the best ways to help your child make healthy food choices. Here are some ideas for creating a healthy food environment:

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- The way you choose food and plan meals sends important messages to your child. By being thoughtful about food and choosing foods that are both tasty and nutritious, you let your child know that food is something that's both enjoyable and fuel for the body.
- Taking a balanced approach to food. This might mean enjoying your favorites treat – pizza, chocolate, potato chips, whatever it is – every now and then, but not all the time.
- Eating when you're hungry shows your child how to listen to the bodies hunger cues. This is healthier than 'counting calories' or eating when you're bored, tired or down.
- Making time to sit and **enjoy healthy meals as a family** encourages your child to eat well.
- Involving your teenager in shopping for food, and planning and preparing meals, gives him a say in healthy family eating. You could even get your teenager browsing recipe websites for you. [This taps into young people's technology skills.](#)
- Young people tend to be motivated by the 'here and now' rather than long-term consequences. To motivate healthy choices, talk together about how food can help with concentration, performance and feeling good. This is likely to be more meaningful than information about longer-term health risks.
- A cupboard and fridge full of nutritious snacks and meals means that your child's appetite and snacking will go a long way to meeting her extra nutritional needs. You also won't have to 'police' the choices, allowing independence.

Physical activity

Regular physical activity is great for young people's health, wellbeing and community involvement. The amount of extra food your child will need – if any – because of physical activity depends on her own energy requirements and level of activity.

The influence of peers on young people's food choices

[Peer pressure](#) increases between childhood and adulthood at the same time as your child is gaining independence and making his own food choices. This is why it's important to develop good eating habits early so your child can make good food choices when he's away from home.

Overweight and obesity

Excess energy intake and minimal physical activity can lead to problems with [overweight and obesity](#). If these problems aren't addressed, long-term effects include increased risk of developing diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

Depending on the age of young people and how overweight they are, the best ways to manage overweight and obesity are through maintaining weight as growth continues or through gradual weight loss. Changing eating patterns in a sensible way and increasing physical activity are the best ways to do this.

If you need advice or wish to speak to someone about your teenagers eating habits, diet or general health please contact Kath – School Based Youth Health Nurse – on 3824 9222.

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Wishing you all a Happy Easter and lovey holiday.