

Weight Management: Helpful Tips for Parents – Part II

Breakfast

Do kids need to eat breakfast? This is a tough one because we have been taught that breakfast is the most important meal of the day but newer evaluation of this shows that this may not be entirely true. Also, breakfast for many children is full of simple carbs and sugar so is not healthy for them anyway. However, many breakfast skippers overeat later in the day. If your child or teen is not hungry in the morning or he/she must get up early for school or feels nauseous when they eat in the morning, then consider evaluating whether he/she is overeating at lunch or dinner to compensate for the missed breakfast. Instead, consider a late morning snack.

Lunch

Many children and teens say they do not eat lunch either. This is concerning because by the time they get home after school, they are likely to binge on unhealthy foods because they are so ravenously hungry. Some will not eat lunch because they do not like the school lunch, do not feel they have enough time to eat lunch or do not want to stand in the long line to get their lunch. Consider packing a lunch from home; this is typically the best and healthiest option. This may be difficult for busy households but definitely worth considering to help control healthy food choices and portions. Avoid sending juice boxes/pouches in their lunch. This is quite unhealthy and unnecessary. Consider the smaller water bottles and a piece of fruit instead. Chips, cookies, and candy should also be limited or eliminated. A treat is ok for special occasions but eating these every day will make reaching nutrition goals very challenging to achieve.

Snacks

Oh, snacks. Snacking really is a bad habit. Children (and adults!) should be eating enough calories in the proper proportions to make it until the next meal. If a snack is important or nutritionally necessary, consider healthier options with low sugar, low saturated fat and preferably a fruit, vegetable, or lean protein option.

Protein

Protein is not often an issue for most children/teens but lean, healthy options would be encouraged. Beef is the hardest on our bodies to digest so non-fried chicken and turkey options are considered healthier. If children/teens are vegetarians or your child/teen just does not eat meat well, consider eggs, tofu, beans, avocado, nut butters, or plant-based protein options.

Vegetables

Your child/teen may go screaming from the room when you start talking about vegetables, but it is very difficult to eat healthy and not eat from this food group. It just might be impossible! Be open to conversations and negotiation about vegetables. Taste buds change throughout years and it is important to have an open mind when trying vegetables for the first time or the millionth time. Trying one new vegetable per week and requiring only one bite per day of that vegetable is a way to get the mouth comfortable with the new taste and texture. Start with the sweeter veggies and work your way to the more bitter ones. Mix veggies in with other foods that hide the flavor. Your child should know when vegetables are in their food, so they learn to recognize that they actually DO like them in certain preparations. Vegetables fill our stomachs so we feel full without having to eat as many calories.

Fruit

Of course, fruit has many nutrients and is often better tolerated by children. Avoid juicing fruits and fruit loaded smoothies due to the dense sugar content. Consider a small amount of fruit for flavor in a vegetable-based smoothie.

Fats

Healthy fats are actually very healthy and should be eaten in larger quantities for weight loss or management. These include foods such as avocado, olive oil, walnuts, macadamia nuts, almonds, salmon, flax seeds, chia seeds, etc. Healthy fats are very important for growth and brain development. Consuming more healthy fats also help us feel full longer so that we are not in the pantry rummaging for chips and cookies.

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates (carbs) are not created equal. High fiber carbs are much healthier than low fiber (or simple) carbs. Consider whole wheat bread, whole wheat pasta and brown rice as good examples of healthy alternatives to their simple carbohydrate counterparts (white bread, white pasta, and white rice).

Sugar

Sugar is our societies biggest evil. Simple sugars are the largest contributors to weight gain and dangerous health issues in this country. Liquid intake of simple sugars should be eliminated. So many simple sugars are consumed in juices and sports drinks because so many consumers still do not realize that these are not healthy choices. Artificial sweeteners should also be avoided. They are associated with weight gain because the artificial sweetener is thought to trigger the need to eat additional sugar, and the long-term safety in children is unknown. If given only two options between Cola or Diet Cola, the diet version should be selected but with the goal to remove that option as well, over time. Consider reading labels - sugar is listed near the bottom. It is often shocking to learn just how much sugar is in foods we generally think of as "healthy". A great example of this is yogurt. Most yogurts, not just those targeted for children, have as much sugar as a soda. Chocolate milk has a similar sugar content. When reading a nutrition label, look at the total carbs and subtract the grams of fiber. This is the true "grams of sugar." In general, most foods in a box or bag are not going to be healthy choices, even if the name makes them sound healthy. Consider first simply decreasing the quantity of these foods as a first goal and the slowly removing them from the diet altogether.

Grocery Shopping & Restaurants

Remember that the healthiest foods are on the perimeter of the grocery store – produce, meat and dairy with healthy grains added. Healthy foods do not have a nutrition label. It is important to embark on the journey as a family and not isolate the overweight child/teen to make healthier choices alone. Do not buy foods that are not healthy and are too tempting. Having a kitchen and pantry set up for success will lead to successful outcomes.

Eating out should be discouraged as much as possible, particularly fast-food. Even salads from fast-food restaurants are typically not healthy. However, we all like to eat out sometimes and indulging in a splurge meal once in awhile is ok, and it may actually be beneficial to long-term success.

Exercise

Exercise, alone, does not lead to weight loss. You cannot out-exercise a bad diet. However, it is important for overall health and can help maintain weight. It also can bring an awareness to healthy eating when you are exercising regularly. The current recommendation for exercise is 60 minutes per day.

This can be play or formal exercise as long as it causes an increased heart rate and some sweating. Finding activities for children can be challenging during the hot summer months, but it should not be an excuse to stop exercising. Get creative. Use an online exercise program, consider active video games (such as Wii), or even start an impromptu dance party in your living room. Playing tag, leapfrog, or hopscotch with younger kids can be fun! Older children could start out by completing jumping jacks, pushups or sit ups during commercial breaks (or every 15-20 minutes for 2-minute cycles if watching a streaming channel). It can take some creativity and parent involvement to make this happen, but it is very important. Exercise decreases risk of high cholesterol, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and even cancer.

Exercise is another change that needs to happen at a family level and not just with your child or teen alone. Open a discussion about exercise goals. If they exercise currently, increase slowly to a goal of 60 minutes daily. If they do not exercise at all, consider starting more slowly (10 min/day). The goal is to have success and ultimately, work up to 60 minutes or more daily. Studies show that making a commitment to ourselves that we can keep, sets us up for long term success.

Food Diary

Food diaries are incredibly helpful tool in weight management/loss to shed light on areas of nutritional change, but it is important to proceed without judgement and without associated shame. Food diaries or journals are designed to determine what is truly being eaten and then allow appropriate changes to be addressed. If the child or teen is not truthful in their food journal for fear of judgement or shame, it will be very difficult to make worthwhile changes. Shame is also a trigger for overeating and must be avoided at all costs.