

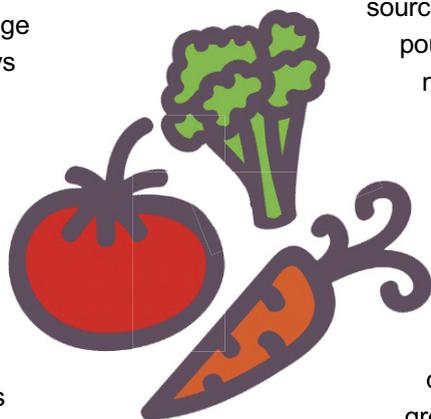
Teen nutrition: Making healthy food choices easy

By Natalie McGill

The road to good health in adulthood is paved with the decisions made during the teenage years. And as teen girls and boys continue to grow, there are daily nutrients and habits they'll need to keep them happy and healthy.

"(In) the transition from the childhood to the teen years, nutritional needs increase with the rapid physical growth that occurs during those years," says APHA member Nicole Larson, PhD, MPH, RDN, a National Institutes of Health-funded researcher and senior research associate at the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health. "So there's an increase in energy demands, but it's also important to think about increases in nutrient demands."

Teens need a variety of nutrients, such as iron, calcium, folic acid and protein, which can be found in lean meats, whole grains, low-fat dairy foods, fruits and vegetables, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion.



Iron is essential for teens, but especially for teen girls, as they'll lose more of it after starting menstruation, Larson says. Good sources of iron include meat, fish, poultry, green leafy vegetables, nuts and seeds, she says.

"Another group of nutrients that's important to be seeking out daily for bone health is calcium and vitamin D," Larson says. "And good sources of these nutrients are low-fat milk, other dairy foods and dark green vegetables, along with fortified foods like fortified juice and cereal."

While foods and beverages high in calories, saturated fats, sodium and sugar aren't off limits, teens should aim to eat those foods only on occasion, according to USDA. Consuming such foods and beverages on a regular basis can have long-term health consequences into adulthood, Larson says. And skipping out on nutrients such as iron could lead to fatigue or anemia.

"You might tend to carry those eating behaviors with you over time," Larson says. "And if you do not eat well over the adult years as well, there's certainly an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, Type 2 diabetes and (being) overweight."

Good nutrition for teens starts at home. Larson says parents who want their teens to practice better nutrition should make healthy food readily accessible.

Keep portable foods high in calcium and vitamin D, such as yogurt and lower fat string cheese, in the fridge for teens. Low-fat granola bars and whole-grain crackers are an easy way for teens to get their fix of iron and whole grains, Larson says. Produce such as pre-washed carrots or sliced apples are also good on the go.



>> For more tips on teen nutrition, visit www.usda.gov

Parents should also encourage teens to eat breakfast before school and to pack their lunch during the school week, according to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases. Parents of teens should try to schedule family meals, as research shows teens who eat with their parents tend to have healthier diets, Larson says.

"While that is not always possible, we know from research that teens really do appreciate having family meals, even though they're often very busy," Larson says. "But that is something that they enjoy."

If it doesn't work to meet up at dinner for a meal, try to be creative in terms of scheduling. Maybe it works better to have breakfast meals together or have lunch together on the weekends."

When teens are out in restaurants, tips include ordering milk instead of soda and a side dish of

fruit over something high in calories, such as French fries. Teens should also look for smaller portions to avoid excess calories, she says.

"Maybe it's easier to order off the kids' menu than the regular menu to make sure you're getting a smaller portion and look for key words that indicate a healthier version of a sandwich or a menu item, like choosing a grilled chicken sandwich instead of a crispy chicken sandwich," Larson says.



Girls v. boys: Different nutrition needs

When it comes to exactly how much produce, dairy and whole grains teens should eat, the needs vary between teen girls and boys. According to USDA, teen girls need four servings of vegetables a day, versus five servings a day for teen boys. Teen girls also need three servings of fruit daily versus four for teen boys. However, both need three servings a day of dairy such as cheese, milk or yogurt.

The Nutrition Facts label is also a useful tool in figuring out how much food counts toward the daily value of calories, vitamins and more. For more information on how to read food nutrition labels, visit www.fda.gov.

