

Food Challenges

for Growing Teens

Fast food, snacks between games, meals out with friends—“normal” eating can go out the window as children grow into teenagers. Yet healthy eating is so important during this time of rapid growth and development.

As your youngsters make more of their own food choices, you can teach them to make nutritious ones, whether they’re eating at home, at school, or in a restaurant. Try these ideas for cramming nutrients into the diets of busy, active teens (even if they wear braces or don’t eat meat).

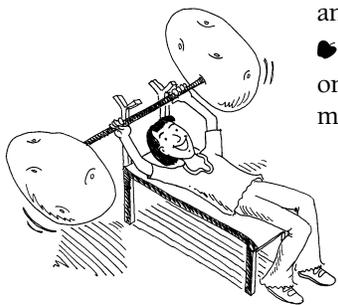


Increase iron intake

Iron is essential for healthy blood, muscles, and brain development. Teenagers need 12 to 15 mg of iron per day (girls should get the higher amount).

Fish, seafood, and meats such as liver and poultry are rich sources of iron. Other foods also supply this important mineral. For example, a slice of whole-grain bread has about 1 mg, and ½ cup of cooked spinach or lima beans has about 2 mg. Increase iron with these ideas:

- Buy iron-fortified bread, cereal, pasta, and rice.



- Leave the skin on when making mashed potatoes.

Encourage your teen to eat her entire baked potato—inside and

out—and she’ll get more than 3 mg of iron.

- Sprinkle wheat germ into recipes. Two tablespoons contain about 1 mg.
- Serve vitamin C-rich foods (such as oranges and strawberries) alongside foods containing iron. You’ll increase the amount of iron your child’s body absorbs.

Crank up the calcium

Teenagers need 1,200 to 1,500 mg of calcium a day for strong bones and teeth. The mineral is especially important for girls, as it prevents bone loss in later life.

The best source of calcium is dairy products (milk, cheese, yogurt), but other foods are rich in calcium, too. Try to get your child to eat spinach, baked beans, salmon, and sweet potatoes, for example. Here are three other ways to boost the calcium in your youngster’s diet:

- Stock a refrigerator shelf with quick, calcium-rich snacks such as low-fat yogurt, cut-up broccoli, and orange slices.
- Sneak calcium into recipes. Use low-fat milk instead of water in soups or in hot breakfast foods (oatmeal, cream of wheat, grits). Add a scoop of nonfat milk powder to pancake or biscuit batter.
- Choose calcium-fortified versions of teen staples like waffles and orange juice.

Brace yourself

For kids with braces, foods like nuts, corn on the cob, spareribs, or popcorn will be off limits. Even biting into a sandwich can be tough.

So what’s left? Plenty! Try these ideas:

- Stock easy-to-chew treats: cubes of soft cheese, canned fruit packed in juice, and deviled eggs made with low-fat mayonnaise.

- Dish up comfort foods such as turkey meatloaf and macaroni and cheese.

- Serve soft tortillas instead of crusty bread. Stuff them with tuna salad (made with low-fat mayonnaise) or mashed beans and shredded low-fat cheese.

- Freeze batches of soup and chili. Store individual servings in freezer bags for your youngster to defrost in the microwave.

- Whip up cool fruit smoothies in a blender for a quick breakfast or after-school snack. Use fat-free milk, strawberries, bananas, low-fat yogurt, and ice cubes.

Avoid meal skipping

Does your child sometimes dash out the door without eating breakfast? Rush off for sports practice without touching dinner?

Teens sometimes skip meals because they’re running late, trying to lose weight, or nothing looks good to them. What can you do?

- Let your child “grab and go.” Have a supply of ready-to-eat, healthy



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food items that he can pick up on his way out the door. Try fresh fruit, low-fat muffins, or fat-free pudding pouches.

- Think outside the cereal box, with alternatives to traditional breakfasts. Stuff whole-grain pitas with hummus and avocado or scrambled eggs and salsa. Reheat last night's dinner. Roll up lean ham and low-fat cheese slices into "cigar" shapes.

- Involve your teen. Have her help you shop for groceries, or, if she drives, send her to the store with a healthy shopping list. You might make one night a week Kid Chef Night, when your youngster cooks and everyone else cleans up. Encourage her to invite a friend over to cook and chat with her.

What about vegetarians?

Some teenagers choose not to eat meat or dairy products. If your child is a vegetarian (eats no meat, poultry, or fish) or a vegan (eats only foods from plant sources), you may wonder whether he is missing valuable nutrients.

Here's how to make sure your vegetarian or vegan gets a balanced diet:



- Encourage variety. Provide plenty of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.

- Push the protein. Good vegetarian sources include milk, cheese, yogurt, and eggs. Both vegetarians and vegans can eat beans, peas, nuts, peanut butter, tofu, hummus, soy milk, and soy cheese.

- Keep an eye on zinc. Dairy products, beans, nuts, and seeds supply this mineral, which helps the immune system and is important for growth and development.

- Don't forget vitamin B₁₂, which is essential for healthy nerves and red

blood cells. Because it's found only in animal products, a vegan has to add it to his diet. Some cereals, soy milks, and meat substitutes (foods made to resemble meat, such as soy burgers) are fortified with vitamin B₁₂. Ask your doctor if a B₁₂ supplement is necessary.

Not so fast!

For busy teenagers, picking up a fast-food meal may seem like the most convenient solution when hunger pangs strike. Unfortunately, your youngster's favorite burger joint serves up plenty of extra fat, cholesterol, and salt.

What can you do? Help him make smarter choices:

- Un-supersize. Encourage your child to buy regular-size portions or to share an oversized meal with a friend.

- Choose healthy. Many fast-food restaurants now offer healthier choices like salads, grilled chicken sandwiches, fresh fruit, milk, and 100% juice. Your teen can ask to substitute lettuce and tomato for mayo or sauce on a sandwich.

- Skip the fries and soda. Instead, take a supply of baked crackers, carrot sticks, cartons of fat-free milk, and bottled water in the car to go with your youngster's turkey sub.

- Keep "fast food" in your refrigerator. For example, buy ready-to-eat salad items (pre-washed greens, cherry tomatoes, celery sticks). Top with cold chicken, turkey, or tofu for an instant meal.

Snack survival

Snacking is a way of life for busy, growing teens. Keep nutritious snacks on hand so your child fills his hunger gap with real food rather than candy bars and soda. Here are some ideas:

- Fresh fruit, whole or sliced and threaded onto wooden skewers (try grapes, berries, kiwi, melon, and pineapple chunks)
- Low-fat cottage cheese with canned peaches or pineapple
- Baked chips and salsa
- Low-sugar whole-grain cereals with raisins
- Rice cakes topped with peanut butter or sugar-free jelly
- Raw vegetables with low-fat ranch dressing (offer cucumber slices, cauliflower and broccoli pieces, and strips of red, yellow, orange, and green bell peppers)

Serve it up

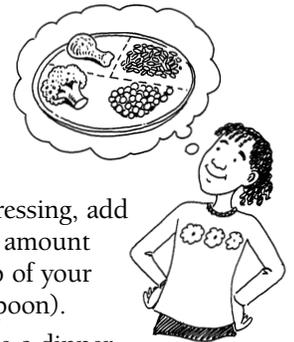
How big is a serving? It's smaller than your teen might think. Help her learn proper portion sizes with these guidelines:

- A clenched fist is about one cup—the size of one serving of pasta, rice, cereal, vegetables, or fruit.

- A portion of meat, poultry, fish, or tofu is as big as your palm.

- For fats, like butter or salad dressing, add no more than an amount the size of the tip of your thumb (one teaspoon).

- Mentally divide a dinner plate into sections. Fill a quarter with protein, a quarter with whole-grain products, and half with vegetables. This will keep portions under control and help your youngster balance her meals.



Editor's Note: Teen Food & Fitness™ is reviewed by a registered dietitian. Consult a physician before beginning any major change in diet or exercise.