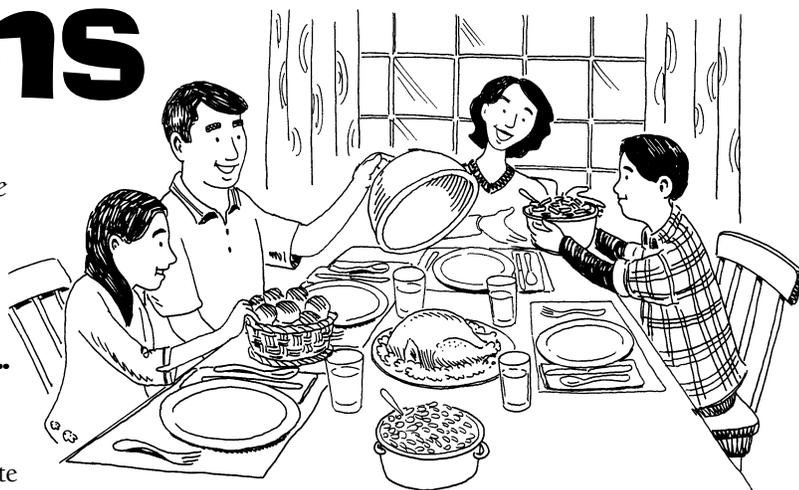


# TEEN NUTRITION: Answers to Tough Questions

As your child grows into a teen, you might face some tough questions about diet, weight, and nutrition. We've pulled together answers to some of the most common challenges.



## Q: Does my teen need to go on a diet?

**A:** At your child's next checkup, ask the doctor to calculate her Body Mass Index (BMI), which is a measure of her height vs. weight. The pediatrician can tell you and your teen if her BMI is in the normal range.

If your child is overweight, get advice from the doctor on a safe weight-loss plan. You'll want to steer your youngster away from both crash diets and diet pills. Explain that very quick weight loss can slow down growth and development, and the pounds usually don't stay off. Diet pills, meanwhile, can cause harmful side effects such as bone loss and mood swings and can also be addicting.

Instead, urge your child to eat well and get regular exercise. Here are several ways to help:

- ◆ Serve nutritious food, and sit down to as many meals as possible as a family (without TV).



- ◆ Set a good example yourself with a healthy approach to eating.

- ◆ Teach your child proper serving sizes. (See <http://hp2010.nhlbi.nih.net/portion/servingcard7.pdf> for a chart.)

- ◆ Keep healthy foods and beverages on hand (fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat cheese and meat, and fat-free milk). Try not to buy candy, high-calorie snacks, or soda.

- ◆ Make physical activity a regular part of your family's routine. *Ideas:* Go hiking or biking, play basketball or tennis on weekends, go jogging together.

For more information, contact your school food service director, or see the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics website, [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org).

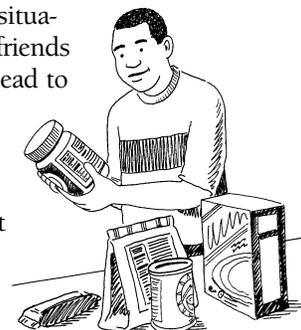
## Q: How can I help my child cope with a food allergy?

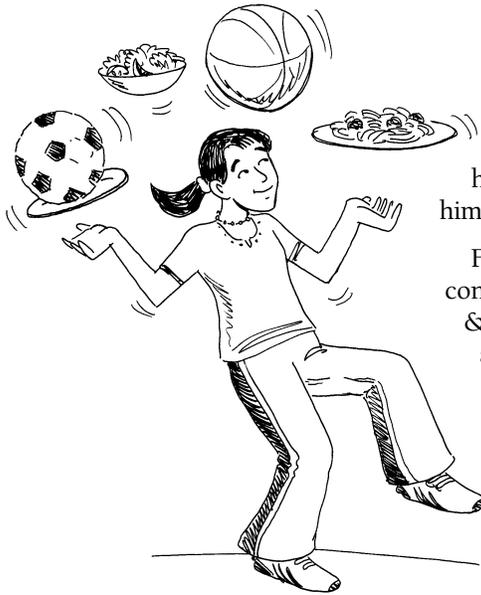
**A:** Your youngster might get a runny nose, hives, stomach cramps, or worse from eating foods that he's allergic to. If he is diagnosed with severe food allergies, alert the school nurse, food service staff, and teachers. Make sure your teen always carries an epinephrine kit, which contains a shot of adrenaline that can stop extreme reactions.

The most common culprits for food allergies are milk, eggs, soy, fish, shellfish, peanuts, tree nuts, and wheat. Remember that children can develop allergies at any time. Also, some people outgrow food allergies, so check with your child's doctor about having your youngster retested from time to time.

Although it's tempting to try to protect your child, you'll help him more by teaching him how to handle his food allergy himself. Try these strategies:

- ◆ Show him how to read food labels. Explain which foods to avoid, and ask your doctor or school nurse for a list of all the names these foods may go by. For example, if your teen is allergic to milk, he'll need to watch out for such things as casein, lactose, and whey powder.
- ◆ Help your child cope with awkward situations. If he has a wheat allergy and his friends are going out for pizza, he could call ahead to check for other choices.
- ◆ If you see your teen doing risky things, such as trying new foods without knowing the ingredients, talk about the consequences. "I know you want to eat ice cream with your friends, but is it worth getting sick afterward?"





◆ Repeat the message that your child can manage his food allergy. You'll build his confidence and give him skills he'll need forever.

For more information, contact the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network at 800-929-4040, [www.foodallergy.org](http://www.foodallergy.org).

**Q: What should I do if I think my child might have an eating disorder?**

**A:** The good news is that most teenagers don't have a true eating disorder. Even so, almost three-quarters of normal-weight teen girls feel they are fat and try to lose weight. Eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia are symptoms of an underlying emotional problem. They can lead to serious health problems—and while they most often affect girls, boys can suffer, too. Watch for these signs in your child:

- ✓ being overly concerned about weight and shape
- ✓ being obsessed with food and calories
- ✓ picking at food
- ✓ feeling guilt or shame about eating
- ✓ regular vomiting or use of laxatives
- ✓ compulsive exercising
- ✓ loss or gain of large amounts of weight

If you suspect a problem, talk to your school nurse or pediatrician. If your teen is diagnosed with an eating disorder, let her know that she is not alone and that you will support her. Encourage her to get professional help, and try to learn all you can about eating disorders yourself. Here are some tips:

- ◆ Don't lay blame. This will only make your child feel worse.
- ◆ Avoid commenting on her weight or appearance.
- ◆ Don't try to force her to eat.
- ◆ Avoid talking about food. Remember, food is not the real issue. A health professional can help your teen get to the root of the problem.
- ◆ Be patient. Recovering from an eating disorder can take a long time.

For more information, see [www.youngwomenshealth.org/eating\\_disorders.html](http://www.youngwomenshealth.org/eating_disorders.html).

**Q: Can caffeine hurt my teen?**

**A:** Did you know that a 12-ounce soda contains 34 mg of caffeine?

Today's teens often consume lots of caffeine in soft drinks, energy drinks, and coffee. Caffeine is actually a drug—it stimulates the central nervous system, causing heart rates to rise and making some people jittery or unable to sleep. It can also be dehydrating, and it's addictive—as you might know if you're a coffee, tea, or soda drinker.

Encourage your teen to reach for fat-free milk or water rather than caffeinated drinks. They're also healthier because they aren't filled with sugar! *Tip:* Make sure your active teenager drinks lots of water to stay hydrated all day long.

For more information, see [www.kidshealth.org/teen/medications/caffeine\\_med.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/medications/caffeine_med.html).

**Q: What about supplements?**

**A:** If the claims sound too good to be true, that's because they probably are. There's little evidence that dietary supplements work. And some can even cause health damage in teens.

Dietary supplements come in pill, gel capsule, liquid, or powder forms. Their safety is not known, since the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which tests foods and medicines before they are put on the market, does not review dietary supplements.

Warn your teens about the dangers of steroids, too. Although boys and girls can both be drawn to these substances because they build muscle, steroids carry high health risks, including heart problems and hormone imbalances.

The best way for your child to get daily doses of vitamins and minerals is from food. If he eats a wide variety of food, including whole-grain products, fruits, vegetables, dairy products, nuts, seeds, eggs, and meats or meat alternatives, he'll get the nutrients he needs.

If you're concerned that your teen is not getting enough of the right foods, ask your pediatrician if a multivitamin would help. If so, try to avoid brands with more than 100% of the recommended daily allowance (RDA) for any one vitamin or mineral.

For more information, see the National Institutes of Health Office of Dietary Supplements website, <http://ods.od.nih.gov>.

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

