

GOOD NUTRITION

Good nutrition and a balanced diet will help your child grow up healthy. Whether your kid is a toddler or a teen, you can take steps to improve nutrition and encourage smart eating habits. Five of the best strategies are:

1. Have regular family meals.
2. Serve a variety of healthy foods and snacks.
3. Be a role model by eating healthy yourself.
4. Avoid battles over food.
5. Involve kids in the process.

But it's not easy to take these steps when everyone is juggling busy schedules and convenience food, such as fast food, is so readily available. Here are some suggestions to help you incorporate all five strategies into your routine:

Family Meals

Family meals are a comforting ritual for both parents and kids. Children like the predictability of family meals and parents get a chance to catch up with their kids. Kids who take part in regular family meals are also:

- more likely to eat fruits, vegetables, and grains
- less likely to snack on unhealthy foods
- less likely to smoke, use marijuana, or drink alcohol

In addition, family meals offer the chance to introduce your child to new foods and find out which foods your child likes and which ones he or she doesn't.

Stocking Up on Healthy Foods

Kids, especially younger ones, will eat mostly what's available at home. That's why it's important to control the supply lines - the foods that you serve for meals and have on hand for snacks. Follow these basic guidelines:

- **Work fruits and vegetables into the daily routine**, aiming for the goal of 5 servings a day.
- **Make it easy for your child to choose healthy snacks** by keeping fruits and vegetables on hand and ready to eat. Other good snacks include yogurt, peanut butter and celery, or whole-grain crackers and cheese.
- **Serve lean meats and other good sources of protein**, such as eggs and nuts.
- **Choose whole-grain breads and cereals** so your child gets more fiber.
- **Limit fat intake** by avoiding deep-fried foods and choosing healthier cooking methods, such as broiling, grilling, roasting, and steaming.
- **Limit fast food and other low-nutrient snacks**, such as chips and candy. But don't completely ban favorite snacks from your home. Instead, make them "once-in-a-while" foods, so your child doesn't feel deprived.

- **Limit sugary drinks**, such as soda and fruit-flavored drinks. Serve water and milk instead.

By drinking milk, kids also boost their intake of calcium, which is important for healthy bones. That means 800 milligrams (mg) a day for kids ages 6 to 8 and 1,300 mg a day after age 9. To reach the 1,300-mg goal, your child could have:

- 1 cup (237 milliliters) of milk (300 mg of calcium)
- 1 cup (237 milliliters) of calcium-fortified orange juice (300 mg of calcium)
- 2 ounces (57 grams) of cheese (300 mg of calcium)
- 1 cup (237 milliliters) of yogurt (315 mg of calcium)
- 1/2 cup (118 milliliters) of cooked white beans (120 mg of calcium)

How to Be a Role Model

The best way for you to encourage healthy eating is to eat well yourself. Kids will follow the lead of the adults they see every day. By eating fruits and vegetables and not overindulging in the less nutritious stuff, you'll be sending the right message.

Another way you can be a good role model is by limiting portions and not overeating. Talk about your feelings of fullness, especially with younger children. You might say, "This is delicious, but I'm full, so I'm going to stop eating." At the same time, parents who are always dieting or complaining about their bodies may foster these same negative feelings in children. Try to keep a positive approach when it comes to food.

Don't Battle Over Food

It's easy for food to become a source of conflict. Well-intentioned parents might find themselves bargaining or bribing kids so they eat the healthy food in front of them. A better strategy is to give kids some control, but to also limit the kind of foods available at home.

Kids should decide if they're hungry, what they will eat from the foods served, and when they're full. Parents control which foods are available to the child, both at mealtime and between meals. Here are some guidelines to follow:

- **Establish a predictable schedule of meals and snacks.** Kids like knowing what to expect.
- **Don't force kids to clean their plates.** Doing so teaches kids to override feelings of fullness.
- **Don't bribe or reward kids with food.** Avoid using dessert as the prize for eating the meal.
- **Don't use food as a way of showing love.** When you want to show love, give them a hug, some of your time, or praise.