

# Healthy Habits for Healthy Kids

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A Nutrition and Activity Guide for Parents





# Introduction

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**If your child needs healthier eating habits or is at risk of becoming overweight, you're probably wondering, "What can I do to help?"**

If you're concerned about your child's weight or eating habits, the first step is to talk to your family doctor or a registered dietitian. Work with your health care professional to determine whether your child is overweight or at a healthy weight. Your health care professional will help you develop a program to help your child eat healthfully and be active.

As part of a healthy eating and physical activity program, parents can help their children reach wellness goals by making healthy changes at home. Weight can be affected by many factors, but environment is often a major component.

Healthy eating and physical activity don't become habits overnight. It takes time and effort to make them part of a daily routine. This guide tells you where to start and what you can do at home to help protect your child. It talks about the important role of family, realistic goals, nutrition and physical activity. The recommendations in this guide are targeted toward healthy weight for children ages 4 – 12.

# Get your entire family involved

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Family. It's a major part of every child's life – and often the most important factor in helping a child make healthy changes. Research shows children are often more willing to eat healthy foods and be active if they see their parents and other family members doing these things first. That's why it's important to get every member of your family involved in healthy eating and physical activity.

## When the whole family participates...

- Your child will learn from example.
- Healthy eating and physical activity will be more fun.
- Everyone will benefit from healthier eating and increased activity.
- It will help to keep everyone motivated and on track.



# Healthy Habits Quiz

Take the Healthy Habits Quiz to help identify areas where your family may want to make changes.

Do you and your family....	Yes	No	Sometimes
Have regularly scheduled mealtimes at home?	_____	_____	_____
Eat meals together at least once a day?	_____	_____	_____
Plan snacks?	_____	_____	_____
Tailor portion sizes to each person's needs?	_____	_____	_____
Plan and prepare meals together once a day?	_____	_____	_____
Eat three meals every day?	_____	_____	_____
Try to make mealtimes enjoyable?	_____	_____	_____
Avoid making everyone eat everything on their plate?	_____	_____	_____
Make meals last more than fifteen minutes?	_____	_____	_____
Eat only in designated areas of the house?	_____	_____	_____
Avoid using food to punish or reward?	_____	_____	_____
Enjoy physical activities together once or twice a week?	_____	_____	_____

Yes = 2 points

Sometimes = 1 point

No = 0 points

## If your total score is:

**20-24** Your family is on the right track. Use this guide for additional healthy eating and physical activity ideas.

**13-19** Your family is doing well but could work on areas where you answered "no" and "sometimes."

**12 or Lower** This guide should be very helpful as you try to help your child toward healthier habits.

Source: *If Your Child is Overweight: A Guide for Parents, 3rd Ed.* American Dietetic Association. Available at [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org).

# Set Healthy, Realistic Goals

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When you make changes step-by-step and set realistic goals, you are more likely to succeed in reaching them. It's best to set goals for healthy eating and physical activity that apply to the entire family.

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Remember—change takes time. Even after you’ve incorporated more healthy foods and physical activity into your family’s routine, it will take time for the changes to become healthy habits.

**Here are a few goal-setting tips:**

- Decide on two or three specific, small changes in eating or physical activity at a time.
- Write your family’s weekly goals down and keep track of progress every day. Writing down your goals and referring back to them regularly will help your family stay on course.
- Keeping a daily food and activity log is a good way to keep track of healthy eating and physical activity goals. Each day, try to write down everything your child eats and drinks and how much time is spent doing physical activities. Older children can keep a log on their own. Focus on accomplishments, not failures.
- Don’t expect perfection. If your goal is to take a family walk five days a week, and you miss a day, that’s okay. What’s important is that you are making a healthy change.
- When your family has turned a healthy change into a habit, it’s time for a reward! Reward yourselves with a fun physical activity, such as bowling, ice skating, miniature golf or canoeing.



# Make the most of family mealtime

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Eating meals together gives you a chance to help your child develop a healthy attitude toward food. It also enables you to serve as a healthy eating role model, ensure that your kids are eating nutritious foods, introduce your family to new foods, establish a regular meal schedule and keep in touch with family members.

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## Here are some tips on making the most of family meals:

- Schedule meals at regular intervals. Without a schedule, kids tend to snack more—and often reach for high-calorie foods.
- Meals tend to be healthier when planned, so try to plan menus a week at a time. Keep a notebook of healthy recipes that your family likes. Refer to it when you need meal ideas.
- Space snacks between meals. Two to three snacks per day are enough for most children.
- Plan to eat at least one meal together every day. If it's difficult to get everyone together for dinner, how about breakfast? Try designating one or two nights a week as family night with everyone helping prepare the meal.

### Help your child understand when she is physically hungry and when she is satisfied:

- Overly restricting food can lead to preoccupation with food or make your child feel punished or rejected. Any restrictive diet should be under the guidance of your health care provider or registered dietitian.
- Food should not be used as a reward or to comfort or punish your child.
- Help your child learn to take appropriate portions and don't require a clean plate.
- Encourage your child to eat slowly. Eating too quickly makes your body think it needs more food to be satisfied. How can speeders slow down? Here are some tips:
  - Put the fork down between bites.
  - Swallow one bite before taking another.
  - If your child wants seconds, have him wait five minutes to see if he's still hungry. Make the second helping half the size of the first.
  - Eat the meal in courses. Start with low calorie foods like fruits, vegetables and salads. Then move on to the main course and side dishes.



#### Did you know?

It takes about 20 minutes for your brain to get the message that your body is getting food. When your brain gets this message, you stop feeling hungry. So encourage fast eaters to slow down to give their brains a chance to get the word.

# Make sure your child eats a balanced, healthy diet.

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Every child needs appropriate amounts of calories, protein, minerals and vitamins to grow. The best way to ensure kids get what they need is to provide a variety of nutritious foods. MyPyramid.gov, developed by the United States Department of Agriculture, is based on recommendations from the 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. MyPyramid.gov offers personalized eating plans for healthy adults and children over the age of two and interactive tools to help you assess food choices, stay active and eat right.

## MyPyramid for Kids: Eating Right Tips

1. Make half your grains whole. Choose whole-grain foods like whole-wheat bread, oatmeal, brown rice and low-fat popcorn more often.
2. Vary your veggies. Go dark green and orange with your vegetables. Eat spinach, broccoli, carrots and sweet potatoes.
3. Focus on fruits. Eat them at meals and at snack time, too.
4. Get your calcium-rich foods. To build strong bones, enjoy low-fat or fat-free milk or milk products several times a day.



5. Go lean with protein. Eat lean or low-fat meat, chicken, turkey and fish. Also, eat more beans and peas. Add chick peas, nuts or seeds to a salad; pinto beans to a burrito; or kidney beans to soup.
6. Change your oil. We all need oil. Get yours from fish, nuts and liquid oils such as corn, soybean, canola and olive oil.
7. Don't sugarcoat it. Choose foods and beverages that do not have sugar and caloric sweeteners as one of the first few ingredients. Added sugars contribute calories with few, if any, nutrients.
8. Know your portion sizes. Oversized portions can contribute to weight gain. See the guide to help you visualize appropriate serving sizes.



Food	Average Serving Size	What it Looks Like
Meat	2-3 ounces	Deck of cards
Pasta or Rice	1/2 cup	Tennis ball
Bread	1 slice	Stack of 3 CDs
Peanut Butter	2 tablespoons	Ping pong ball
Vegetables	1/2 cup	Tennis ball
Cheese	1 ounce	Four dice

# Get active!

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As with healthy eating, kids are more likely to want to be active when other family members are active too. Find ways to build physical activity—step-by-step—into your family routine. Here are some tips on getting family members together for physical activities:

- Plan regular physical activities as a family. Take an after-dinner family walk three days a week—or schedule a weekly Saturday afternoon trip to the park.
- Limit television, video games or computer time to one to two hours a day.
- Focus on fun rather than skill. If kids think of physical activity as fun they'll be more likely to want to do it.
- Encourage your kids to play outside with other children. Be sure where they are playing is safe.
- Use fun physical activities as a reward. When your family reaches one of its goals, celebrate with a fun, active outing you can enjoy together. Go play miniature golf, practice at a batting cage, visit a water park, go hiking or skating.
  - Include activity in your daily routine. Take the stairs. Park farther away at the store and walk. Have your child participate in chores that involve physical activity such as sweeping, gardening or walking the dog.



- Expose your kids to a variety of physical activities and allow them to choose which ones they like best. Here are some activities your family may want to try:

basketball  
hiking  
swimming  
freeze tag  
soccer  
dancing  
softball

canoeing  
kickball  
biking  
hopscotch  
tennis  
frisbee  
volleyball

football  
running  
catch  
playing outside  
bowling  
ice skating  
inline skating

- Keep in mind that some kids feel uncomfortable in competitive sports, so activities everyone can participate in regardless of skill may be a better choice. Activities not based on skill level include:

walking  
hiking  
tag  
playing outside  
dancing  
bowling

biking  
sledding  
jogging  
swimming  
flying a kite  
ice skating



## Healthy Hints for Eating Out with Kids

Here are some tips to help you help your child make healthy food choices when eating out.

- Think ahead and plan where you will eat. Consider your family's food preferences and what meal options are available.
- Look beyond the children's menu. It may be limited to high-calorie, high-fat foods. For smaller portions, encourage your child to choose from appetizers, soups, salads and side dishes.
- Guide your child toward nutrient-rich beverage choices such as low-fat milk or 100 percent fruit juice.
- Be a role model when eating out by making healthy food choices and not overeating. Your children are likely to follow your lead and develop their own healthy eating habits.
- Make portion control a priority. Split large sandwiches or entrees. Share an order of fries. For a sweet treat, divide a dessert into a bite or two for everyone in the family to enjoy.
- Build a better sandwich by choosing lean beef, ham, turkey or chicken on whole grain bread. Ask for mustard, ketchup, salsa or low-fat spreads. And, don't forget the veggies.
- Load up your pizza with vegetable toppings. If you add meat, make it lean ham, Canadian bacon, chicken or shrimp.
- Always eating on the go? Take along portable, nonperishable foods for an on-the-run meal. Some suggestions are peanut butter and crackers, granola bars, fresh fruit, trail mix, and single-serve packages of whole grain cereal or crackers.

## Resources for Additional Food and Nutrition Information

American Dietetic Association	<a href="http://www.eatright.org">www.eatright.org</a>
Good Nutrition Reading List	<a href="http://www.eatright.org/gnrl">www.eatright.org/gnrl</a>
If Your Child is Overweight	<a href="http://www.eatright.org/catalog">www.eatright.org/catalog</a>
American Academy of Pediatrics	<a href="http://www.aap.org">www.aap.org</a>
American Academy of Family Physicians	<a href="http://www.aafp.org">www.aafp.org</a>
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	<a href="http://www.cdc.gov">www.cdc.gov</a>
U.S. Department of Agriculture	<a href="http://www.usda.gov">www.usda.gov</a>
MyPyramid	<a href="http://www.mypyramid.gov">www.mypyramid.gov</a>
Eat Smart Play Hard	<a href="http://www.fns.usda.gov/eatsmartplayhard">www.fns.usda.gov/eatsmartplayhard</a>
Dietary Guidelines for Americans	<a href="http://www.dietaryguidelines.gov">www.dietaryguidelines.gov</a>





The **American Dietetic Association** is the world's largest organization of food and nutrition professionals. ADA is committed to improving the nation's health and advancing the profession of dietetics through research, education and advocacy.

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