

Consumer and Family Sciences



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Department of Foods
and Nutrition

Forming Good Habits in Children to Avoid Obesity

Changing habits

Habits are automatic actions that have been learned through frequent repetition. Remember when you first learned to drive a car? You had to consciously think about every step: putting the key into the ignition, putting the car into drive or reverse, braking at stop signs, turning on blinkers, or dimming the lights at night. Now that you have driven for several years, these movements are automatic, and you may drive without thinking about what you are doing. Another automatic action is brushing your teeth. You do not think about putting the toothpaste on the brush or how you brush. Sometimes you may have questioned later whether or not you had brushed your teeth because you did it without really thinking about it. These actions have become habits.

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You can form either good or bad habits for anything you do, including eating. Where, when, and what you eat may be something you do not think about much. When you are bored, reading a book, watching TV or are frustrated or anxious, you may automatically eat a banana or candy bar. This occurs because you have formed the habit of eating when you were doing these things.

Right now your children are forming habits that will last a lifetime. You need to do what you can to encourage good habits and discourage bad ones. Habits are difficult to change. Good habits need to be formed at a young age. Poor eating habits may result in impaired health or lead to obesity in later life.

How might your children form bad eating habits? Ask yourself the following:

Do you or your family do the following often? Seldom? Almost never?

1. Eat snacks while watching TV.

2. Use food to bribe your children to behave. "Behave now and I will give you a treat (food) later."
3. Use food as a form of recreation to make yourself feel good. "Hey I'm bored! Let's go get ice cream (or some other food)."
4. Have snack foods such as chips, candy, soft drinks, or crackers in plain sight.
5. Use food to treat the family.

If you answered often or sometimes to one or more questions, you may be helping your children to establish eating habits that can lead to weight problems.

There is a smart reason to develop good eating habits early: Twenty-five to fifty percent of today's children will be overweight or obese when they are adults. This percentage could be decreased if children learn to make proper food choices while they are young.

Helpful hints

The following are some suggestions to help your children establish good life-long eating habits to prevent weight problems.

- 1) Establish a meal pattern that is suitable for the entire family. The pattern may not include three meals a day, but it should have some regularity to it. Many overweight people skip breakfast, miss lunch or eat very lightly, start snacking in the afternoon, and eat 75% or more of their daily food after 4 p.m. It's better to avoid eating a large amount at any one time, and keep to a minimum food eaten after the evening meal.
- 2) Establish one eating place in the home and eat there only. This helps to cut out snacking in front of the TV, in the bedroom, on the couch and the like. Break this pattern only infrequently.
- 3) Keep treats just what they really are — treats! Most Americans live with food at their fingertips. That tempts them to eat whenever they want, i.e., the donut shop, the ice cream parlor, dessert mixes, and frozen sweets. Because these foods are so readily accessible, it is difficult to avoid forming the habit of eating whenever you desire. Treats such as potato chips, sweet desserts, and soft drinks should be just that — treats; don't let them become daily habits.
- 4) Don't allow eating to become a form of recreation. How many times has your family eaten because they were bored? If there isn't anything else to do, family members may substitute eating for a hobby. If you find that you or other family members eat for recreation, you should find a hobby in which you or the entire family is interested. Then, when working on the hobby, don't add that "extra fun" by eating.
- 5) Hide high-calorie snacks and keep low-calorie nutritious snack foods available. When members come home hungry from school or work, they often will eat almost anything in sight. Snacks should be a part of the regular dietary pattern of your family and provide nutrients that the family needs. Snacks may be sandwiches, milk, fruit, or vegetables. They should be readily available to family members.
- 6) Avoid buying foods in which your family tends to overindulge. Although the types of foods vary with families and family members, problem foods could be pies, cakes, and sweet rolls. Again, buy limited quantities of these foods and use them infrequently as treats. If they are not purchased, they will not be eaten.
- 7) Learn serving sizes for each family member and serve just enough food to take care of their needs. This suggestion is true especially if a family member is having difficulty controlling his/her weight.
- 8) Plan snacks ahead of time. Snacks are small meals. Just as any meal should be planned, snacks should be planned each day to provide needed nutrients and to prevent obesity. If you wait until you are hungry to decide what snack to eat, you may choose a snack high in calories. Also, more of the snack may be eaten than necessary if you or your child wait until the last minute to decide what to eat.
- 9) Prepare snacks before the time to snack and make them easily accessible. When a person is hungry, he or she will tend to eat the first food seen that does not need preparation. For example, when a child comes home from school, he or she probably will eat the potato chips, crackers, or cake that are in plain view on the kitchen counter rather than the unwashed fruit or carrots that are in the crisper in the refrigerator. Keep foods such as sweets, crackers, and chips out of sight or don't purchase them if they are problem foods for your family.

Vegetables, such as carrots, celery, and cauliflower, and fruits should be rinsed in plain water and cut so that little time is needed to prepare them. Very few people want to stop and clean celery when they are hungry. They would rather eat crackers or cake that need no preparation. The child or teenager should know where vegetable snacks are kept in the refrigerator.

10) Provide snacks that are high in nutrients in relation to calories. Foods that are low in nutrients and high in calories such as potato chips, soft drinks, cake, pie, and candy should be rarely prepared or provided.

11) Limit the amount of snacks. The child or teenager should not be allowed to eat as much snacks as he or she wants. Snacks are to curb the appetite, not to satisfy it completely. They are not substitutes for a meal. A limited amount of food should be served or made available for snacks. Otherwise, enough of the snack food may be eaten to satisfy the appetite. If snacks come from only one or two of the food groups instead of a larger variety of food, the child or teenager may not be getting all of the nutrients he or she needs.

12) Teach your family members to ask themselves “Am I really hungry” or “Do I need this food?” Many children or teenagers are truly hungry when they come home from school, and they need to eat some food to help curb their appetite before dinner. This hunger is real. But often your child may want to eat when he or she is not really hungry. For example, he or she may want a snack after the evening meal just because he or she sees a food advertised on TV. A parent can teach a child to learn not to eat when he or she is not really hungry.

Snack foods

Freebies: Less than 25 calories

Celery	Cucumbers
Cauliflower	Tomato wedges
Radishes	Zucchini
Lettuce wedge	Green pepper strips or rings

25-50 calories

- 1/2 grapefruit
- 1/4 cantaloupe
- 1 cup plain popcorn
- 1 carrot
- 1 plum, tangerine, or peach

50-100 calories

- 1 cup grapes, watermelon, strawberries
- 1 orange, apple, banana
- 1 hard-cooked egg sprinkled with pepper
- 1 cup skim milk
- 1 slice bread with 1 teaspoon margarine

Over 100 calories

1 cup chili	1 cup whole milk
1 cup ice cream	1/4 cup peanuts
2 peanut butter cookies	1 cube cheese
1 piece bread, 2 tablespoons peanut butter, 2 teaspoons jelly	
8 saltines with 3 tablespoons peanut butter	

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