During adolescence, your child’s body and brain grow and develop very quickly. There are lots of changes going on in the way your child thinks, feels and relates to people. Many teenagers might also be more aware of their bodies, and become worried about their shape and size.

At the same time, your child needs more of the right kinds of food to support growth and development. Because teenagers are growing so much, it can be harder to keep up with their nutritional needs.

The demands of adolescence increases the need for some very important nutrients:

- **Energy and protein**: your child always needs these, but even more so during adolescence to meet the additional needs of physical development and growth.
- **Calcium**: your child needs high amounts of calcium, to allow healthy bones to develop during adolescence.
- **Iron**: your child needs more of this for the adolescent growth spurt, and girls need even more when they start getting their periods.
- **Zinc**: this is important for growth and sexual development.
- **Vitamins**: these support growth and general health.

Physical and emotional changes plus higher nutrition needs can add up to teenagers being at risk of eating problems and treating their bodies in unhealthy ways.

Adolescence can also be a risky time for disordered eating and eating disorders such as [anorexia nervosa](https://www.betterhelp.com/anorexia-nervosa), [bulimia nervosa](https://www.betterhelp.com/bulimia-nervosa), [binge eating disorder](https://www.betterhelp.com/binge-eating-disorder) and [eating disorders not otherwise specified](https://www.betterhelp.com/eating-disorders-not-otherwise-specified).

On the upside, adolescence is a great time for building on healthy food habits, so that your child goes into adulthood ready to make good nutrition choices. For example, it’s good if teenagers can enjoy a range of foods, eat when they’re hungry, and understand that ‘sometimes’ foods are just that.

Healthy family meals, teaching cooking skills, and modelling the right nutritional intake are some of the best ways to encourage these habits.

Your child will probably put on 15% of final adult height and 40% of adult weight during the adolescent growth spurt. That’s a lot of growing!

**Why teenagers can be at risk of problem eating**

**Lifestyle and food habits** might change as your child begins to eat more meals and snacks away from your family environment. In fact, making their own decisions about food and drinks is one important way that teenagers can develop autonomy and independence. But this is also a time when young people are more aware of and influenced by media messages and information at school about health, obesity and dieting.

Some of the changes you might notice in your child’s eating habits and attitudes towards food include:

- eating at random times and/or skipping meals
- eating more convenience foods and high-energy sugary snacks, including soft drinks and alcohol
- being more aware of media information about ‘healthy’ eating, obesity and diets
- experimenting with dieting and restrictive eating (that is, not eating certain foods or food groups).
Teenagers are going through social and emotional changes that mean they’re more aware of body image and very self-conscious about how they look.

The combination of body image concerns and media messages can lead some teenagers to start diets or develop eating habits that aren’t good for their growing bodies.

It’s not known exactly why some adolescent children develop eating disorders. But we do know that it’s not your fault. If your child has an eating disorder, your love and support will be very important in helping your child get better.

**Red flags**

If you notice that your child has changed eating habits, mood and behaviour – particularly in relation to food – you need to talk with your child and a health professional as soon as you can. The conversations should be calm and non-judgmental. Emphasise your concerns about your child’s health and wellbeing, not weight and appearance.

'Red flags' for eating disorders include if your child:

- loses weight or goes up and down in weight – note that someone doesn’t have to be ‘thin’ to have an eating disorder (in fact, rapid weight loss in overweight teenagers can lead to an eating disorder)
- avoids social activities, particularly ones that involve food
- prepares food for others, but doesn’t eat it
- cuts down on portion sizes or shows other signs of highly limited eating and dieting
- cuts out ‘junk food’, and then cuts out major food groups such as meat or dairy
- goes to the bathroom or toilet straight after meals
- vomits or uses laxatives
- exercises too much, particularly while alone in the bedroom
- denies that there’s a problem.

Friends, teachers or coaches might also tell you that something isn’t right with your child.

You should also be concerned if you notice changes in your child’s body. These might include:

- irregular periods in your daughter, or periods stopping altogether
- your child seeming to be cold all the time
- your child complaining of feeling faint or dizzy, tired or constipated
- soft downy hair growing on your child’s face, arms or torso
- hair loss from your child’s head.

These changes are signs of weight loss, decreased body fat and poor nutrition.

**Seeking an early assessment and opinion from a health professional is a really good idea.** Early intervention for disordered eating can stop problem eating turning into a full-blown eating disorder. Also, it might be easier to get your child to see a health professional now than further down the track. If you step in early, you might be able save your child from intensive treatment and a very long recovery time.

Although research has looked more at the eating behaviour of adolescent girls, boys can also develop eating disorders.

**Talking to your child**

If you think that something just isn’t right about the way your child is eating or behaving around food, trust your judgment and talk to your child.

This could be a tricky conversation. You might feel really worried, and your child might get angry and say that there isn’t a problem. Even if this happens, try to stay calm and focus on your concerns about your child’s health. Tell your child that you think an assessment with a health professional is needed.
Great care needs to be taken in addressing health messages that touch on food, weight and body image. If you’re not sure how to talk about these issues, you could first visit a doctor, dietitian or mental health professional and ask for help. Contacting an organisation listed in the section below is another option.

Getting help

If you’re worried about your child’s eating habits, it’s a good idea to take your child to see a GP, dietitian or mental health professional as soon as you can. If possible, try to find a health professional who has experience in the eating disorder field. A doctor can refer your child to a specialist eating disorder service if needed.

What is good food?

Good food means a wide variety of fresh foods from the main food groups – fruit, vegetables, grains, lean meats, fish, poultry and dairy.

Each food group provides different nutrients. That’s why we need to eat a range of foods from across all the food groups.

The good food groups

Fruit and vegetables
Fruit and vegetables help protect your child’s body against all kinds of diseases. This is because fruit and vegies provide energy, vitamins, antioxidants, fibre and water.

Children aged 4-8 years need to eat at least one piece of fruit and two servings of vegies every day. Instead of giving your child full serves (one serve equals half a cup) of just two vegetables, you might want to consider including several smaller serves of vegetables for more variety.

Choosing different-coloured fruits and vegetables is a great way to get a good range of nutrients.

Starchy foods and grains
Starchy foods and grains give your child the energy she needs to grow, develop and learn. These foods include cereals, breads, rice, pasta and noodles. It’s a good idea to offer them at every meal.

Starchy foods with a low glycaemic index, such as pasta and wholegrain bread, will give your child long-lasting energy.

Lean meats, fish and poultry, and meat alternatives
Lean meat, fish, chicken and meat alternatives such as eggs, beans (legumes), tofu and nuts give your child iron, zinc, vitamin B12, omega-3 fatty acids and protein for growth and muscle development.

Iron and omega-3 fatty acids are particularly important for your child’s brain development and learning.

Milk and other dairy products
Milk, cheese and yoghurt are high in protein and calcium, which helps build strong bones and teeth.

When your child’s a baby, breastmilk or formula is the best milk until he’s 12 months old. After that, he can start drinking full-fat cow’s milk before switching to low-fat milk after he turns two.

To get enough calcium, children aged:

- 1-3 years need 1-2 cups of milk or dairy serves a day
- 4-8 years need three dairy serves a day
- 9-13 years need 3-4 dairy serves a day
- over 13 need 4-5 dairy serves a day.

A serve of dairy can be one cup of milk, two slices (40g) of cheese or a 200g tub of yoghurt.

Water
Water’s the best drink for your child.
Sweet drinks – which include fruit juice, cordials, sports drinks, flavoured waters, soft drinks and flavoured milks – can fill your child up with sugar. This might mean she won’t want to eat her meals.

Drinking sweet drinks can also contribute to weight gain and obesity and tooth decay. If kids start on these drinks when they’re young, it can kick off a lifelong habit.

'Sometimes' foods

'Sometimes' foods include chips, chocolates, lollies, cakes, pastries, muesli bars, soft drinks, juices and takeaway foods – basically anything that’s high in sugar, salt and/or fat, and low in nutrition.

It can be easy to eat too many ‘sometimes’ foods. The important thing is to find a balance – no more than 1-2 small serves of ‘sometimes’ foods a day is plenty.

Why breakfast is important

Breakfast gives children the energy they need to handle their busy days. Children who eat a healthy breakfast go longer without feeling hungry. This means they can concentrate on playing, learning, remembering and solving problems better.

Research shows that a healthy breakfast can help children perform better at school.

Breakfast eaters also tend to:

- have better school attendance than those who regularly skip breakfast
- be more emotionally healthy than non-breakfast eaters
- be less likely to snack on sugary or fatty foods, which helps them stay at a healthy weight.

What a healthy breakfast looks like

A healthy breakfast needs to have a balance of carbohydrates, protein and fat to keep energy levels steady all morning.

For babies and toddlers, breakfast might be rice cereal, milk and fruit. School-age kids and teenagers might like to choose from porridge, low-sugar wholegrain cereal, a boiled egg, an omelette, wholegrain toast, fruit and yoghurt.

Choosing healthy foods and eating enough breakfast will help your child get through the morning. Highly processed, sugary cereals won’t give her as much energy and will make her feel hungry sooner.

Encouraging reluctant breakfast eaters

You’re an important role model when it comes to eating. Showing your kids that breakfast can be yummy and that it’s an important part of your day is a good way to encourage them to eat it. You can talk about its benefits with them too.

Here are more ways to encourage good breakfast habits:

- Make breakfast a time to sit and eat with your kids. Being a good example is a powerful way to change their habits.
- If your child says he’s not hungry in the morning, try making a healthy smoothie, with milk, yoghurt and fruit, instead of a more traditional breakfast ‘meal’.
- Another option is for your child to eat a small meal at home, such as a small bowl of cereal or a piece of fruit. You can then give your child a healthy snack to eat before school starts – for example, a sandwich, muesli bar or wholegrain fruit bun.
- If a hectic morning schedule gets in the way of breakfast, try setting your child’s alarm 10 minutes earlier, or packing your child’s bag and laying out his clothes the night before. You could even get the next day’s breakfast ready at night, putting dry cereal in a covered bowl, or placing toppings like sliced fruit, nuts or raisins in a muffin tray.
- Fussy eaters often respond better at meal times if the food is more interesting than usual. Young children love toast or fruit, and older kids can occasionally prefer ‘non-breakfast’ foods, like leftover pasta.
Older children and teenagers might refuse to eat breakfast as a way of showing their independence. Try not to make a big deal about this. You could suggest your child takes a piece of fruit, a smoothie or a muffin to have on her trip to school instead. She might also like to choose her own healthy breakfast options when out shopping.

A recent study showed that children who skipped breakfast were more likely to have parents who didn’t encourage them to eat in the morning.

**Nutritional benefits of breakfast**

Human bodies make energy from carbohydrates, breaking them down into a sugar called glucose. After a night without food, your body has used up this glucose. It starts to use stores of energy from your muscles instead, like glycogen and fatty acids. This is why we need a fuel top-up before we tackle the day.

Eating breakfast will give your child energy and get his metabolism started. It will help his body use the food he eats more efficiently throughout the day. Also, children who miss breakfast don’t ‘catch-up’ on those missed nutrients during the rest of the day.

**Benefits of family mealtimes**

It isn’t always easy to put a meal on the table and get the whole family to sit down together, but a regular family mealtime is worth the effort.

Whether it’s a nightly dinner or a special Sunday lunch, setting aside special mealtimes gives everyone a chance to catch up and connect with each other. Your child can also learn a lot about food and eating by watching what you do at mealtimes.

For younger children, eating with the rest of the family helps them learn good table manners and eating habits. It can also help your child learn to communicate, as he takes turns talking and listening. And watching the rest of the family tuck in can encourage picky eaters to try new foods.

For older children and teenagers, family mealtimes are an opportunity to connect, communicate and have a break from other activities.

**Six ways to make family mealtimes enjoyable**

1. **Set aside regular times to eat together**
   When you put these times in your weekly schedule, you’re all more likely to be there. Having your meal at a table, with the television and phone turned off, can make this time even more special. Children can help by setting the table and even decorating it with flowers from the garden or homemade placemats.

2. **Reduce the rush**
   Allowing around half an hour for the family meal gives your children plenty of time to eat. They’ll have the chance to try new foods and develop good eating habits. This also gives you time to relax, chat and enjoy your family.

3. **Get everyone involved**
   Involving your family in choosing and preparing the meal increases the chance that they’ll eat it. It can also help fussy eaters to try new food. Older children and teenagers might enjoy choosing and cooking a meal for the family – for example, once a week. This helps share the responsibility for preparing a meal and gives your child the chance to learn to cook.

4. **Use mealtime as a chance to talk**
   Family meals can be a great way to keep up with what everyone’s doing. But many parents know what it’s like to be on the receiving end of a grunt or a ‘Dunno’ when they ask a question. If this sounds like you and your child, using questions that need more than a yes-or-no answer can help. For example, ‘Tell me one cool thing that happened at school today’.

   Another idea might be for everyone to take turns sharing something good and bad about their day. This way your child won’t feel like she’s being put on the spot.

   But if your child really doesn’t want to talk, it’s best not to push too hard or bring up touchy subjects. The idea is to make family mealtime enjoyable and social.
5. Reward good behaviour
When your children are eating nicely, using good manners and trying different foods, try to reward them with some descriptive praise. Tell them what they’re doing well. You might even want to use a reward chart to reward behaviours like trying every food on the plate or saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’.

6. Be creative with mealtimes
When you have the time and opportunity, having some fun with mealtimes can give everyone a reason to be there. For example, on a weekend you might:

- make pancakes for breakfast
- have a picnic at the park, in your backyard or on the lounge room floor
- invite a special guest over for dinner, like a friend, grandparent or neighbour. This can also be a great way of getting to know your older child’s or teenager’s friends
- create a meal with a theme – for example, food from another country, maybe a country with a language your child is learning at school.

With a little effort, family mealtime can become something the whole family looks forward to.