

Staying at a Healthy Weight

The keys to reaching or staying at a healthy weight are regular exercise and good eating habits. Some people think exercise and good eating require lots of effort or planning. But that's not true. In fact, the best way to work them into our lives is by making small changes that gradually become part of our routine.

We've all succeeded in making changes that are now ingrained in our lifestyles — learning to brush our teeth, for example. Here's the information you need to make these other healthy habits just as easy.

Regular Exercise

Teens should get 60 minutes or more of physical activity a day. Note the word "activity": As long as you're getting your body moving, it doesn't have to mean doing complicated exercises or hitting the gym every day. All that matters is that each week you get the right balance of activity, including aerobic, strength building, and flexibility exercise. Make exercise a habit by scheduling some every day.

On days when you have soccer practice or an aerobics class, you may have no trouble exercising for an hour or more. But most of us are busy, and 60 minutes a day of activity seems like a lot of time. The good news is that it's OK to divide it into shorter "exercise breaks" throughout the day.

Just as you might have a healthy snack to stop yourself getting hungry, exercise snacks can keep energy levels high. So get up 15 minutes early and do some yoga or other stretching activity. Fast walk or jog for 15 minutes at lunch. Do the same thing after school — or walk or bike home. Add to that taking the stairs, gym class, and walking between classes during the day, and you've probably reached your 60 minutes.

Here are 10 simple ways to make an exercise lifestyle change:

Start today. Go outside for a walk.

Take the stairs instead of the elevator.

Instead of driving, walk or bike to places like school or a friend's house.

If you have to drive, park farther away than you need to and walk the extra distance, if it's safe to do so.

Vacuum your room, wash the car, or mow the lawn. It's not a chore — it's an exercise opportunity!

Limit your time watching TV, using the computer, or playing video games — and when you do play, try interactive games that get you moving.

Dance. Even in the privacy of your room, letting loose to your favorite tunes could help you burn more than 300 calories an hour!

Figure out what type of exercise interests you, then give it a try! Take it slow if you've never done it before. And if you're nervous at first, find an exercise buddy to join you. It's usually easier to stay motivated about exercise if you do something you're interested in.

If you get bored or lose interest easily, alternate the kinds of activities you do so they always feel fresh.

Be sure to include some activity that gets your heart beating faster, quickens your breathing, and makes you sweat.

Good Eating Habits

Eating well doesn't mean dieting over and over again. In fact, studies have shown that dieting often doesn't work — and diets may have the reverse effect, with dieters gaining back more weight than before they started.

One reason diets don't work is because they can encourage people to think of foods as "good" or "bad," when the truth is everything is OK in moderation. Diets also encourage people to "give up" certain foods, which can make us feel more deprived. And not only do we feel deprived, diets often deplete our bodies of important nutrients. Teens should eat a variety of foods, and there's nothing wrong with the occasional treat. A candy bar somehow tastes more special if we treat ourselves once in a while instead of every day.

The best way to stay at a healthy weight (or lose weight if you need to) is to make healthy food choices daily. For some of us, that means changing our mindset about food. Instead of thinking of food emotionally (for example, as a reward for doing well on a test or as a way to deal with stress), see it for what it is — a practical way to fuel our bodies.

Here are 10 tips for making healthy eating a part of your life:

Replace soft drinks, fruit juices, and sports drinks that are loaded with sugar with water, low-fat milk, or sugar-free drinks.

Eat at least five servings of fruit and vegetables a day. The fiber will fill you up and you'll get the nutrients and flavors to keep your body satisfied.

Choose foods from all the different food groups. In addition to getting your fruits and veggies, include whole grains and lean protein at each meal.

Make healthier fast-food choices. Pick a small, single-patty burger instead of a large one and a side salad instead of fries. Stick to regular servings — don't supersize! Better yet, avoid fast-food places whenever you can.

Keep healthy foods on hand. If your kitchen is stocked with healthy choices like celery, raisins, and peanut butter you can make ants on a log instead of dipping into the cookie jar (you may need to teach your parents a thing or two about food to be sure they buy you the good stuff!).

Take your own good-for-you snacks and food on the road so you can avoid the vending machine or convenience store. Try carrot sticks, a piece of fruit, or your own homemade trail mix instead of cookies, chips, or processed foods that tend to be loaded with fat and calories.

Eat when you're hungry. If you're tempted to eat because you're bored, that's your mind telling you to find something else to do.

Eat a healthy breakfast every day.

Don't eat meals or snacks while watching TV because you'll probably end up eating more than you intend to.

Pay attention to portion sizes. If a portion is large, cut it in half and put half aside for later — or split it with a friend.

Use your creativity to come up with ways to fit exercise and healthy eating into your life in a way that works for you. We're all different. Your best friend might prefer to schedule some gym time while you'd rather take your Frisbee-playing dog to the park. Knowing what's right for you will make it a lot easier to do!