

## Nutrition in Teenagers

Adolescence is a nutrient intense period of life. The body is growing and developing rapidly which has a high demand for nutrients. This is also a period of life that lays the groundwork for future health and eating habits.

At the same time young people want to make their own choices, including what they eat, which can make for some difficult meal times and worried parents.



### What do we know about teenage nutrition in general?<sup>1</sup>

- **Salt, fat and sugar** consumption are, on average, higher than recommended.
- **Fibre intake** is low at just 15g per day on average. By 16 years, teens should be aiming for 30g per day.
- **Fruit & veg** is low with only 8% of 11-18 year olds getting their 5-a-day.
- **Micronutrients** such as folate, vitamin A, zinc, iodine, calcium and iron, are low for some teenagers, particularly in girls.
- **Vitamin D** status is low in 26% of 11-18 year-olds.
- **Weight** issues concern many teenagers.

Low consumption of micronutrients and high salt, fat and sugar, if continued into adult life, are not setting up our young people for good health in the future.

Encouraging teenagers to eat a varied diet which includes fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, pulses, nuts, seeds, moderate meat and dairy, some fish and to eat less salty, sugary and fatty foods will improve their health.<sup>2</sup>

See our Factsheet on ***What is a healthy diet?*** for more information.



### Teens have a right to good health

Teenagers will benefit from better health later in life but they also have the right to better health right now. We all benefit from better eating in the shorter term, for teens this can mean:

- **more energy** to do the things they enjoy.
- **improved concentration and memory** which helps get through the school day and homework.
- **an optimal immune system** which helps their bodies combat infection, reducing the severity of symptoms and helps recovery.
- **better performance** in any physical sport or activity.
- **confidence** as our skin, hair, nails and body all benefit from good food, if we are well it shows.
- **weight management** is easier when eating well and managing hunger with good meals and snacks.

## Factsheet

Young people need to be empowered. By understanding the right to be healthy and what that means for them is a first step.

Bite Back 2030<sup>3</sup> is a campaign for young people, championed by young people. It is a great place to start a conversation about how we are influenced to make our food choices, not always for the better.



### Supporting teenagers to eat well

Teenage years are the transition to the adult world, from food being provided solely by parents to ultimately fending for themselves at university or their first home.

This is a journey, that amidst the noise of social media, marketing, finding their voice and pushing boundaries, they need help to navigate.

Teenagers can be difficult, that's no secret. Guiding teenagers towards eating better is not simply a case of telling them what to eat.

### Choice and Control

Teenagers want to have choice and to feel heard. They want to feel like adults. Simple ways to help this are:

- Involving them in choosing meals.
- Listen to why they don't like things.
- Listen to their opinions.
- Embrace passions like sustainability and a desire to eat differently, encourage them to research how they do this and stay healthy.
- Agreed kitchen and meal time rules and boundaries can be helpful.
- Teens can be ravenous or not so hungry. Let them be in control of portions. Sufficient portions at mealtimes can help reduce snacking.

### Get them cooking

Cooking develops life skills, they are more likely to try new foods and it is possible to introduce shopping, planning and budgeting.

Teenagers often like cooking more than their parents expect, especially when they are left to get on with it alone.

### Be a good example

Eat a wide variety of foods yourself. Avoid diet talk and fad diets. Don't be seen to be picky. Try new foods. Talk about listening to your body and respecting hunger and satiety.

### Social media

Our teenagers are very connected.<sup>4</sup> Social media can affect their food choice or their attitudes towards food and eating. Be social media aware and help them to understand the power that their selected social media feed has.

Anyone can share information on food. This information is not regulated, yet it is often the go-to place for advice on food and diet. Guide teenagers to ask who is providing the information? Are they qualified? How does a post make them feel? Does it sound too good to be true?<sup>5</sup>



### Eating disorders

This age group is when eating disorders are most likely to present themselves. If you are concerned about a young person then do not hesitate to seek advice.<sup>6</sup>

#### References

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3. Bite Back 2030 Available: <https://biteback2030.com/real-story/watch-our-launch-film-here>
4. Ofcom (2019) Children and parents: media use and attitudes report. Available: [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0023/190616/children-media-use-attitudes-2019-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0023/190616/children-media-use-attitudes-2019-report.pdf)
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