

# What is real healthy eating?

Wherever you look and listen now there is a wealth of information about healthy eating and what you and your children should and should not eat.

Healthy eating advice tends to focus very much on avoiding obesity and weight gain, but for many parents, especially those with daughters, a more common issue is that of dieting, 'faddy eating' and the many concerns their children might have about their weight and appearance.

Children and teenagers are bombarded with images, diet advice and information about weight, which often leads them to adopt unrealistic and potentially dangerous aims for their own weight and appearance. Any advice and guidance given to our children about healthy eating needs to counteract this kind of influence, as well as give information about how to avoid gaining too much weight.



## A Mother's perspective

I wondered if our daughter was being bullied at first, or at least 'picked on' by some of the very slim girls at school, because she had suddenly begun to get extremely sensitive, even hostile about her appearance, which was healthy, and of medium build.

She read every magazine article and book on so called 'healthy eating' and every cereal packet and food package. She began to row with us about what was a suitable and adequate diet for a growing girl her age. She assumed that the calorie guidelines for an adult woman meant that, as a child she should need less, which of course was not true. She decided to cut out all snack foods like chocolate and crisps and cut down on all her food.

Reasoning with her was so hard. Eating our regular meals together began to be a problem as she decided to go vegetarian. She said the meals we had always liked were unhealthy. As it was summer, the number of different diets on the television was more appealing and authoritative than we were. Weighing herself often and talking about body image became an obsession for her. She stood in front of the mirror all the time. We were really worried about her eating and decided to talk to the GP who referred us to the practise nutritionist, which was really useful. *Jackie*

## A question of balance

Healthy eating means eating a well-balanced diet which includes a range of foods, eaten with ease and enjoyment. Normal healthy eating, particularly for growing children, will generally include snacks, since not all of their requirement in terms of calories will be met in meals alone. Healthy eating does not mean eating only so called 'healthy foods', and a balanced diet will not exclude any foods that are perceived to be 'bad' or 'naughty', nor will it involve anxiety about food or weight.

Normal eating means eating more than usual on some days or on certain occasions, such as at parties or restaurants, and also eating less than usual sometimes. As the body and appetite self-regulate very naturally. It means having a positive attitude towards food and eating, and towards your own body and its requirements and patterns. For example, girls who have started their periods will notice that their appetite changes around the time of the menstrual cycle and their weight may fluctuate even more than it does usually.

Above all, healthy eating sustains a healthy weight for height and growth and enables a child to develop and have the necessary energy for enjoyable exercise without weight loss. A growing child (certainly up to the age of 16) should not be losing weight unless under the direction of a GP for medical reasons.

## When is it more than just a diet?

Parents can be unsure as to whether a child's dislike for certain foods or a change in their child's eating pattern is a real cause for concern or just a phase. Significant weight loss in a child should always be investigated. The doctor or practise nurse should oversee any weight loss in a child less than 16 years of age. Up until this age, children are still developing and will be gaining steadily in weight and in height. Parents who are concerned can talk privately to their doctor, taking the relevant information (such as the child's age, height and weight) with them and any other behaviour or issues they see that might be worrying them.

### Things to watch out for

Eating disorders are something that most parents are aware of, and many fear – particularly if they have teenage girls. However, whilst the majority of teenagers will diet or worry about their weight at some stage, for most this will be a passing phase. It is important to be aware of the things to look out for which might be a sign of something more serious developing.

It is not just under-eating which can be the sign of a problem. Children and teenagers who try to restrict their eating and go on very strict diets will often have periods of time when their control breaks down and they overeat, sometimes in secret. They may gain more weight as a result and become very unhappy. This can then lead to comfort eating which will exacerbate the problem. If a child is gaining weight and overeating, care should always be taken to look not just into what they are eating, but also how they are feeling and why.

## Warning signs

My friends told me not to worry, that all teenagers are difficult and hostile. 'They all worry about their image and their weight,' they said. But I knew this was different and I was scared. My daughter had lost her usual sparkle and was becoming sad and withdrawn in company.

She seemed to throw herself into her schoolwork and her sport, setting herself impossible goals and deadlines. She became hysterical if we 'interfered' or suggested taking a break. We noticed her eating less and becoming very choosy about food and worried about her shape. No amount of my reasoning with her seemed to make any difference. My husband hated coming home at night as the atmosphere was becoming so tense.

Quite quickly she started quizzing me on what ingredients I used in my cooking. Then she started watching over me when I was cooking and serving up. It made me feel so nervous. Finally my friend rang to ask if I knew she was throwing her packed lunch away at school. I knew we had a serious problem and we needed help. *Barbara*

## Potential indicators

Do you have a cause for concern? Here are some potential indicators:

- Very strict rules about what is and what is not eaten
- Signs of panic or anxiety at mealtimes and elsewhere – especially if control is lost e.g. when food has already been prepared unobserved
- Lack of flexibility – for example sticking to the diet even at parties or special occasions
- Dieting combined with excessive exercise
- A marked clash between what a child thinks of their body and the reality (i.e. wanting to lose weight and talking about how fat they are when they are really thin)
- Any significant change in weight – up or down – which is unexpected
- Depression and withdrawal from friends
- Very negative thinking and self-loathing
- Increased temper, hostility, anger, crying, rage and/or self-harm
- A rigid and punishing regime bordering on the obsessive e.g. work, exercise
- Avoiding mealtimes e.g. with excuses for not feeling well, being busy and elsewhere
- Storing, throwing away or hiding food or the evidence it has been eaten (e.g. hiding wrappers)
- Going to the bathroom straight after every meal
- Medical conditions, including sleep problems, loss of periods (if started), fainting, feeling very cold etc.





## Healthy eating teaching in schools

“We had this class teacher talking to us about healthy eating. She went on and on about fat and how unhealthy we all probably were. I remember her saying things like ‘you wouldn’t believe how many extra calories you add just by putting butter on your toast.’ Then she gave us each a tray with some foods on it - things like a packet of crisps, a Mars bar and some biscuits - and some other stuff too like a tin of beans and some cheese spread. We had a dish with cubes of lard in. We had to put the number of cubes we thought each thing contained. It was so disgusting. I vowed never to eat fat again after that lesson.”

The above quote from a 14 year old shows how easy it is for the wrong message to come across about food and health from a class lesson. It highlights not only the responsibility the teacher has to present the curriculum in a positive way, but also how easy it is for children to take an image or a message and act upon it.

Peer pressure can make attitudes even more fixed, particularly during the teenage years when a young person’s identity and self worth, not to mention the hormonal aspects of growing up, are all being reviewed and are making an impact. Younger children are perhaps even more impressionable and can be more naïve in their thinking. The class teacher at primary level may well have a greater influence because of the closeness of the relationship with the younger child.

### Confusing messages

I remember when it all began. She came home from school saying she had had a lesson on healthy eating and that she should not be eating any fat or any salt.

She went through our cupboard and read the back of every tin in there, taking most out and putting them on the surface. When she was finished all that was in there were a couple of tins of tomatoes and some sweet corn. “That’s all I am allowed to eat,” she said, “because all this will make me fat.” She was just 8 years old.

We went to see her class teacher, who was very upset that she had given our daughter the wrong message. She offered to sit with her during lunch and eat alongside her. We were amazed to hear that although the teacher spoke words of encouragement to our daughter while she was eating her lunch, the teacher herself ate only yoghurt and an apple.

*Mark*



It is important for teachers to help their pupils understand the nutritional needs of their growing, developing bodies with a good positive self awareness. It is vital not to reflect the dietary requirements of an adult or any issues they may have with their own self-image. Promoting the enjoyment of food, that eating is a natural part of life and a positive attitude can favourably redress the balance of the eating debate.

Parents also can play their part. If parents are at all worried about the way healthy eating is being taught, or how their child is interpreting it, they are well advised to make enquiries of the teacher concerned.

Teachers are generally sensitive towards their pupils and aware of the problems facing children generally, or affecting a particular child.

Teachers should understand that anxiety about food and restricting eating is potentially dangerous. However, they can also play an important role in encouraging a pupil, identifying problems or difficulties at school, and helping to manage a pupil’s eating whilst at school. Liaising with parents and with the school medical staff and counsellors is a vital contribution.

## Healthy eating in the home

Parents have seen considerable changes in family life since they themselves were children. Mealtimes and eating styles have evolved differently and vary from one family to another. The range of foods has increased greatly nowadays and advertising promotes choice for parents and children alike.

However, with parents working unusual hours and children coming home late from school, clubs or activities, a family meal where all members eat together is not always possible or feasible. It is therefore easy for the image of the 'family meal' to be confused with 'healthy eating at whatever time seems best'.

## The basic principles

Understanding and applying the basic principles of good nutrition, which can be obtained from books or from the doctor or health visitor, are part of healthy eating. This understanding may need reviewing if a child is a particularly fussy eater or has intolerance to certain foods or food groups. Another aspect is maintaining a good attitude towards food and towards eating. Being aware of the variety and quantity that a growing child requires is also very necessary for their health.

## My family and food

We all enjoy our food. I would say we eat healthily, meaning we eat a good variety. But we don't consciously think about planning it for health. I like to give the children good home cooked meals which I have time for as I don't go out to work anymore, but they also like their snacks too which I think is normal. I don't let them have snacks just before a meal. They love fruit, and have completely different tastes when it comes to vegetables, so I do two types.

I think mums nowadays are bombarded with diet information for themselves and for the children. It's on the TV, and they also get it from school: low salt, 5-a-day, too much saturated fat. I think it can make an issue about food when it should be easy and relaxed. My children are not overweight and they are not too thin. I don't know what they weigh, but I know they don't have a problem with food and they have loads of energy. They're growing too. They both eat breakfast before school, which I think is important. They also tell me if they haven't liked the school lunch. I know anyway because they come home even more starving than usual! *Hilary*

## A positive result

She'd been quite a difficult eater, and had always hated cheese and butter - actually when she was little she wouldn't drink milk. Fortunately she liked yoghurts, custard and rice pudding, so I didn't worry too much. When she was 13 though, she went through a really difficult time. All her friends were talking about their shape and were dieting.

I know I'd always been on a diet so I blamed myself. I thought I'd been a bad example, that she copied my skipping meals and stressing about what I was eating. She started to refuse other foods like bread, potatoes and pasta as she said they made her feel bloated. I found it a really difficult time

because I'm single, have a full time job, and because I don't like food that much myself.

So I let her choose some really nice prepared meals, which we ate together as soon as we were home - so no fuss or wait. Neither of us eats breakfast, but she took cereal bars to school. Her games teacher was really nice to her and persuaded her to go in to school lunch instead of having sandwiches, which she wouldn't eat anyway. She much preferred choosing a healthy meal like jacket potatoes and the vegetarian options. Her teacher told her that she wouldn't have the stamina for the team and wouldn't be chosen if she didn't eat enough - this really made a difference.

## Extra help

### Support groups

#### Anorexia & Bulimia Care

([www.anorexiabulimiacare.org.uk](http://www.anorexiabulimiacare.org.uk)) – a Christian charity helping all those who suffer because of eating disorders. Tel: 01934 710679

Email: [mail@anorexiabulimiacare.co.uk](mailto:mail@anorexiabulimiacare.co.uk)

Helpline for those concerned about younger teens and children: 01934 710645

#### Beat

([www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk)) – offering information and help on all aspects of eating disorders.

Tel: 0845 634 1414

Email: [help@b-eat.co.uk](mailto:help@b-eat.co.uk)

Helpline for young people: 0845 634 7650

Email: [fyp@b-eat.co.uk](mailto:fyp@b-eat.co.uk)

### Bookshelf

*Eating Disorders: The Path to Recovery* by Dr Kate Middleton (2007). Lion Publishing. ISBN: 9780 7459 52789

*Beyond Chaotic Eating* by Helena Wilkinson (1993), Zondervan. ISBN: 0551027509

*Care for a loved one with an Eating Disorder – The New Maudsley Way* by Janet Treasure, Grainne Smith and Anna Crane, Routledge. ISBN: 9780415431583

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