



## PART TWO: SUSTAINING HEALTHY TEEN EATERS

# Transitioning to Food Freedom

Raising healthy eaters transitions from the ABCs with “parents in charge” of family mealtime that includes age-appropriate activities, behaviors and communication (Part I, Summer 2011) to adolescence—a time of substantial independence in making food choices. During this developmental stage, teens are susceptible to peer, media and food-environment influences beyond the family table. This issue of *Health Connections* discusses how health professionals and parents can help adolescents manage these influences in their daily lives and become independent, healthy eaters.

### Background—The Future in Real Time

Adolescence is an opportune time for the development of food-choice behaviors that continue into adulthood. High nutrient requirements during this life stage and the rising rate of obesity and its adverse health outcomes require a life-course approach to food selection in order to make a significant contribution to optimal health and disease prevention:

- Girls at age 9 followed through adolescence whose diets resembled the DASH eating pattern (rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat and fat-free dairy, lean sources of protein) had smaller gains in body mass index (BMI) over 10 years.<sup>1</sup>
- Disordered eating behaviors during adolescence continue to be prevalent among young adults.<sup>2</sup>
- Severe under nutrition in childhood, adolescence or young adulthood can increase risk of heart disease later.<sup>3</sup>
- Almost 95 percent of adult peak bone-mineral density is achieved by about age 16—the time when calcium needs are highest and intake may be marginal.<sup>4</sup>

Making chronic disease prevention relevant now in real time to youth with increasing “food freedom” away from home requires linking the future to teens’ more immediate concerns. Suggestions on how to bridge that time gap are provided as you read on.

### Family Meals Still Matter

Although many adolescents frequently eat away from home due to competing demands of school activities, sports, social life and jobs, family meals continue to play an important role in promoting healthy dietary intake and eating behaviors. Adolescents themselves associate shared family meals with healthier eating and believe they would eat healthier if they ate more meals with their families.<sup>5</sup> Teens who eat at least five meals a week with families are 35 percent less likely to engage in disordered eating than teens sharing one or fewer family meals.<sup>6</sup>

The association between shared family meals and various nutritional/health outcomes may be influenced by household availability of a greater variety of nutrient-rich foods compared to foods eaten away from home. In addition, family meals offer an opportunity for parental/adult modeling and engaging conversation that enables parents to connect with their teens during this important phase of increased autonomy.

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## The Food-Marketing Landscape

Food choices are highly malleable—particularly when promoted as exciting, fun and cool to impressionable teens that spend money and develop preferences and brand loyalties early in life.<sup>7</sup> Digital technology has enabled integrated marketing communications (product-brand websites and placements in entertainment and sports venues, advergames, viral and mobile marketing to direct teens to local food establishments), to entice impressionable teens to become foodies on their own, with little knowledge to evaluate

the nutrient quality of the products promoted. To address the effects such marketing practices can have on food choices, both government and private industry are working to craft guidelines that best promote healthy food choices to children and teens while preventing misleading or inaccurate claims about specific food products.

(<http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2011/04/foodmarket.shtm>, <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2011/04/110428foodmarketfactsheet.pdf>)



Jill Castle, M.S., R.D., L.D.N.

## INTERVIEW

### Jill Castle, M.S., R.D., L.D.N., Child Nutrition Expert, Nashville, TN

#### Q. As teens become more food-independent, what is the role of parents?

A. Parents still set the tone at family meals and serve as role models. Teens may ultimately embrace or reject that role model, particularly if it is too extreme, too healthy or unhealthy, but teens remember what happens around the family table and will fall back on those values when on their own. A healthy meal at home can be a strong contrast to what teens encounter in the greater food environment.

Parents offer balanced and tasty meals at regular times, and teens are at liberty to choose within the framework of what is offered. Parents should remain neutral and resist commenting on whether the teen eats as healthfully as the parent would like. Parents can explore choices and make teens aware in a non-judgmental way that says, “I’m not in charge; it is your body and your choice.” Teens are prepared to choose using information I’ll describe below.

It is OK for parents to have and set expectations. When everyone understands that mealtime is family time to show concern and interest through conversation, it is also understood that there will be no distractions—no cell phones, texting, television. I encourage a mandatory weekly meal that is not about “eating right,” but a time for a family update—a meeting that happens around a meal.

Even if some meals are “disjointed” (members eat at different times), parents who “save a plate” for the teen to enjoy later say they still care, as opposed to saying, “you’re on your own.” Health professionals can help families develop such

a “nutrition mantra”—what parents consider important for teens to know about family meals and nutrition—so they can live it now and use it into adulthood.

#### Q. What concerns do parents have at this developmental time?

A. Rarely stated and often not addressed by health professionals is parental fear of not being prepared to raise the next generation of adults/parents. This fear is highlighted during teen years when parents realize they are losing what control they might have had.

Making thoughtful choices about food and eating can only happen if we equip both parents and teens with basic nutrition information. Unlike infancy and early childhood when parents receive a great deal of nutrition and food guidance, adolescence represents the forgotten part of “childhood.” Bombarded with messages to “eat right,” parents are without a basic nutrition framework to put such messages into context. Unsure and grasping nutrition information from many sources (accurate or not), parents feel pressured and experience an underlying fear that they might have dropped the ball with their teens, which then might lead to disordered eating or chronic conditions later in life.

#### Q. How can health professionals best work with teens and their parents?

A. Parents often are grateful for health professionals who work directly with their teens because parents admit that they do not know what to say or do, or their teen won’t listen to information from them. Our role is to ask teens questions

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about their food choices and ask for permission to share information without telling them what to do. Always be sensitive to the misunderstanding or misuse of nutrition information, and provide factual, neutral information. Ask teens if they know what a healthy plate looks like—and if not, explore whether they would like to know. Some will, some won't. I talk about intuitive or "tuned-in" eating and the "secrets of dining out," using fast-food menus to help teens identify healthier choices. Teens also like shock value. I find that portion distortion resonates, so I compare restaurant portion sizes to a "nutritional serving size."

Teens need to know more than what foods to eat. They need to know how to make healthy choices in the framework of their anticipated activities and navigate an environment that is not going away. Teens don't know good, healthy nutrition until they know:

- Which foods promote health, and how to balance selection among these foods and foods that are not so healthy
- When and how much to eat, recognizing fullness/satisfaction both physically and emotionally
- How to set meal and snack schedules so there are no extremes in hunger and nutrient needs are met
- Basic food preparation and food-safety skills—especially when heading off to college—to provide themselves with healthy meals/snacks

**Q. How can health professionals/parents motivate teens and tie their daily food choices to future health outcomes?**

A. Most teens want to have healthy skin, hair and greater focus and concentration for academic achievement or sports participation. With teens, words matter, so parents and health professionals need to think about the words used. Linking nutrition and health to "appearance" may be misinterpreted to mean body size, shape and weight. (See Side Bar for resources on promoting healthy weight.) With teen girls I talk about being lean rather than thin; for adolescent boys I talk about being strong rather than muscular; and with the athlete I talk about nutrition for endurance or a faster pace.

Words can be interpreted differently, so use positive messages. When teens hear 'no fat,' they think all fat is bad and can be turned off by a "have-to-have" approach to food and nutrition. Be more exploratory—ask questions about what teens know and ask permission to share what you know, tailoring it to their needs.

## Practice Points for Health Professionals

- Habits and behaviors in the teen years have far-reaching implications to future health. For example, high school girls reporting two dairy servings a day had a 38 percent lower risk of type 2 diabetes as adults. Some of the benefit of healthy food choices during high school may be due to the persistence of intake pattern during adulthood.<sup>9</sup>
- Make sure teens eat breakfast, often skipped if erroneously perceived to be a way to lose weight. Research has shown that breakfast frequency was inversely associated with weight gain in male and female adolescents.<sup>10</sup>
- Be alert to adolescents and teens that may exhibit eating-disordered behavior and follow up appropriately (see Side Bar).
- Whether fast-food consumers or not, adolescents fall short in their intake of fruit and milk and should be encouraged to maintain intake of all food groups.<sup>11</sup>
- Link healthy nutrition and dietary habits with factors that will motivate individual teens—athletic ability, healthy skin and hair, body-weight management.
- Stay current on teen nutrition and health-behavior research, such as Project EAT (Eating Among Teens), which investigates the socioenvironmental, personal and behavioral factors associated with diet and other weight-related behaviors during adolescence. <http://www.sph.umn.edu/epi/research/eat/index.asp>

## REFERENCES

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## Side Bar: Resources for Promoting a Healthy Weight

Personal appearance, body dissatisfaction influenced by peers or celebrities, weight and obesity concerns make adolescence a vulnerable period for dieting and disordered eating behaviors. Disordered eating extends along a range from food restriction to diagnosed conditions such as anorexia, bulimia and binge eating. Some resources for promoting healthy body weight and image include:

- Position of the American Dietetic Association: Nutrition Intervention in the Treatment of Eating Disorders<sup>8</sup>
- Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity <http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/>
- National Eating Disorders Association <http://www.edap.org/information-resources/general-information.php>
- Teens WebMD <http://teens.webmd.com/>