

Teacher Background: Principles of Healthy Living

Make the switch from sugary drinks to water.

Water is essential to human survival, optimal functioning, and health, which is why it should be the go-to choice when deciding what to drink. Sugary beverages such as soda, sports drinks, energy drinks, and fruit drinks are filled with empty calories, meaning they provide many calories but almost none of the nutrients the body needs to stay healthy and grow strong. Research shows that children who have too much sugar are at risk for unhealthy weight gain and type 2 diabetes.

Choose colorful fruits and vegetables instead of junk food.

Fruits and vegetables are packed with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and fiber, and they also provide healthy carbohydrate that gives us energy. A good goal is eating five servings each day—and more is always better—so fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables at every meal, and eat them as snacks instead of junk food like chips, candy, and other sweets. Choose fruits and vegetables in a rainbow of colors (especially dark-green and orange vegetables).

Choose whole-grain foods and limit foods with added sugar.

Minimally processed whole grains are a better choice than refined grains. Whole grains contain fiber, vitamins, and minerals, whereas the refining process strips away many of these beneficial nutrients. Even though some refined grains are fortified with vitamins and minerals, fortification does not replace all of the lost nutrients. In addition, refined grains get absorbed by the body very quickly, which can cause blood sugar levels to spike. In response, the body quickly takes up sugar from the blood to bring sugar levels down to normal. Working so quickly may cause the body to overshoot things however, making blood sugar levels a bit lower than they should be. This can cause feelings of false hunger even after a big meal, and tiredness. Choose whole grains (like steel-cut oats and 100% whole-wheat bread) whenever possible, making sure to check the nutrition facts label and ingredient list for added sugar.

Choose foods with healthy fat, limit foods high in saturated fat, and avoid foods with trans fat.

Plant-based foods, including plant oils (such as olive, canola, soybean, corn, sunflower, and peanut oils), nuts, and seeds, are natural sources of healthy fat, as are fish and shellfish. Healthy fat can help lower the risk of heart disease and stroke. Unhealthy fat—

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(continued)

including saturated fat—increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. Most foods that are high in saturated fat come from animals, including dairy fat, the fat in meat, and lard. However, even a few healthy plant-based foods and fish contain small amounts of saturated fat, so we can't completely eliminate it from our diet. As a general rule, keep your intake of saturated fat as low as possible, opting for healthy foods like salmon, almonds, and avocados, instead of hamburgers and cheesy pizza. The worst type of unhealthy fat is trans fat, which raises the risk of heart disease, stroke, and possibly diabetes. Trans fat is formed when healthy vegetable oils are partially hydrogenated (a process that makes the oil solid or semisolid and makes the fat more stable for use in packaged foods). Foods with trans fat and partially hydrogenated oils should be avoided. (Note that at the time of publication, the FDA banned the use of partially hydrogenated oils in food products, giving manufacturers three years to comply with the decision. This edition's messaging on avoiding trans fat from partially hydrogenated oils remains important guidance during the transitional period.)

Eat a nutritious breakfast every morning.

Breakfast is a critical meal because it gives the body the energy it needs to perform at school, work, or home. Studies have shown that breakfast can improve learning, and it helps boost overall nutrition. Many common breakfast foods can be rich in whole grains, and it's a great meal to incorporate colorful fruits and vegetables.

Be physically active every day for at least an hour.

Regular physical activity not only improves our physical health (by helping to prevent unhealthy weight gain, obesity, and several chronic diseases) but also benefits our emotional well-being. Children should get at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day, which can be broken up into multiple sessions throughout the day. This can include active free play, as well as structured activities that are age-appropriate, enjoyable, and offer variety. Any episode of moderate- or vigorous-intensity physical activity, however brief, counts toward the daily goal.

Limit TV and other recreational screen time to 2 hours or less per day.

The more television you watch, the less time you have to engage in physical activity or other healthy pursuits; the same goes for spending time online on your computer or smartphone for fun, text messaging, and playing video games. Watching more television means seeing more ads for unhealthy foods, and research suggests that this leads to consuming more calories. Such sedentary behavior combined with poor diet can lead to unhealthy weight gain. Children should limit total recreational screen time to no more than 2 hours each day, whether it be a TV, computer, smartphone, or other handheld device—anything with a screen counts.

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Get enough sleep to give the brain and body the rest they need.

It takes a lot of energy to work hard in school, eat well, and stay active, which is why it's important to get enough rest to recharge for the next day. Children who don't get enough sleep have a harder time paying attention in school, and lack of sleep is linked to unhealthy weight gain. Children ages 6 to 12 should be getting at least 10 hours of sleep each day, so it's important to set up a regular bedtime routine and provide a bedroom without a TV, and with smartphones and other screens turned off.

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