

# NIH News in Health

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**Inside News:** 3 Kids' Dental Health... 4 Promise for Peanut Allergy... Relaxation Techniques... Check Up on Your Bones

## Shape Your Family's Habits Helping Kids Make Healthy Choices

Many things can influence a child, including friends, teachers and the things they see when they sit in front of the TV or computer. If you're a parent, know that your everyday behavior plays a big part in shaping your child's behavior, too. With your help, kids can learn to develop healthy eating and physical activity habits that last throughout their lives.

Healthy eating and physical activity are essential for children of any age. "Good nutrition and physical activity are important for building strong bones and muscles and feeling good about yourself," says Dr. Lynne Haverkos, a child development specialist at NIH. "Some research suggests that physical activity might even help improve children's thinking and mental functions."

Getting active and eating right may also prevent excess weight and childhood obesity, a growing concern in this country. Today, nearly 1 in 3 children in the United States is overweight or obese. "Being overweight puts a lot of stress on joints, muscles, bones and the heart, and it increases your risk for certain diseases," Haverkos says. "We're also finding that overweight toddlers are more likely to become overweight middle schoolers, high schoolers and then adults. That's why it's important to take action early."

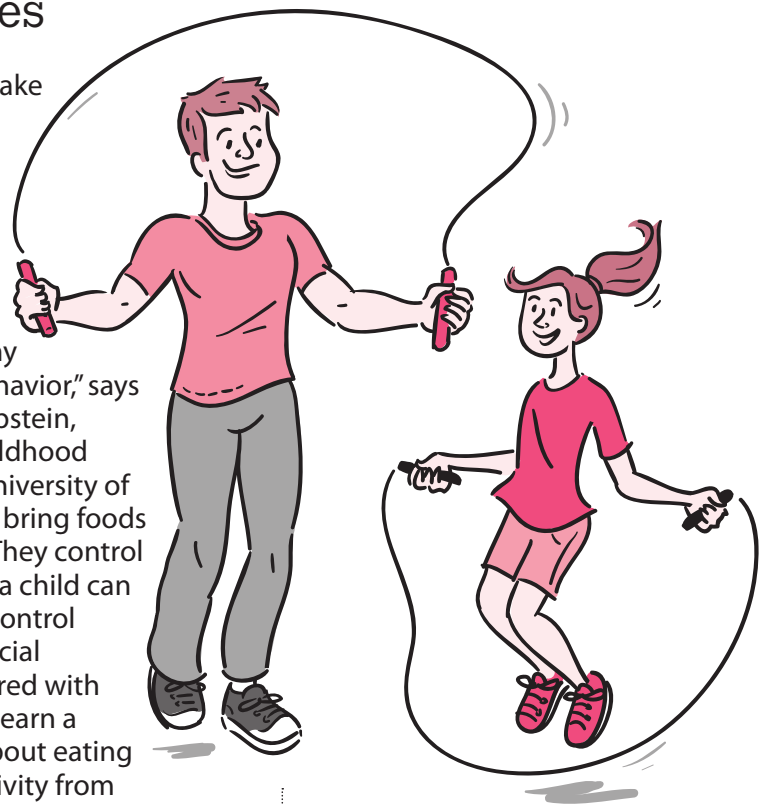
Although most of us know that it's a good idea to eat healthy food and move more, it isn't always easy to do. Children aren't likely to change their diet and activity habits on their own. It's up to you to make it easier for

your family to make healthy choices.

"Parents are very important in terms of arranging an environment and setting a model for healthy or unhealthy behavior," says Dr. Leonard H. Epstein, an expert on childhood obesity at the University of Buffalo. "Parents bring foods into the house. They control how much time a child can watch TV. They control what kinds of social activities are paired with foods. And kids learn a huge amount about eating and physical activity from watching and imitating their parents."

Epstein's research shows how important parents can be. In NIH-funded work, his team assigned obese children, ages 8 to 12, to different types of weight loss programs. All the groups were taught about healthy diet, behaviors and exercise. For some groups, positive feedback and encouragement for weight loss and behavior changes were given only to the child. Other groups focused on both the child and an obese parent. Comparison groups received little feedback.

The researchers found that when obese parents and children worked together, both were more successful at losing weight and making healthy changes. "Our studies suggest that getting the whole family working



together really benefits the child," Epstein says. "Even after 10 years, when these kids were 18 to 22 years old, the ones who had the parent working with them had lost more weight and maintained more weight loss than the ones treated by themselves, and obviously more than the comparison groups."

Over time, most parents gradually began to regain their lost weight, the researchers found. But after

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10 years, more than 40% of the kids who worked with their parents had maintained a weight reduction of at least 20%. "The finding suggests that even if the parents go back to their old behaviors, many of the kids will not," says Epstein.



### Wise Choices Help Kids Form Healthy Habits

- **Be a role model.** Eat healthy family meals together. Walk or ride bikes instead of watching TV or surfing the Web.
- **Make healthy choices easy.** Put nutritious food where it's easy to see. Keep balls and other sports gear handy.
- **Focus on fun.** Play in the park, or walk through the zoo or on a nature trail. Cook a healthy meal together.
- **Limit screen time.** Don't put a TV in your child's bedroom. Avoid snacks and meals in front of the TV.
- **Check with caregivers or schools.** Make sure they offer healthy foods, active playtime and limited TV or video games.
- **Change a little at a time.** If you drink whole milk, switch to 2% milk for a while, then try even lower fat milks. If you drive everywhere, try walking to a nearby friend's house, then later try walking a little farther.

While it's never too late to start making healthy changes in your family, research suggests that the earlier your kids learn healthy behaviors, the better.

Dr. Julie Lumeng, a pediatrician at the University of Michigan, focuses her NIH-funded research on the factors that affect eating behaviors in young children—especially preschoolers and infants. That's an ideal time to start exposing your children to a variety of healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables, so they develop a liking for them.

Getting young ones to accept fruits and vegetables can be a challenge, but some parents give up too quickly if a child rejects a new food. Research suggests that the more times you offer a food, the more likely a child will be to warm up to it. "Kids typically have to taste a new food 9 to 15 times to begin to like it," Lumeng says.

If your child doesn't like a new food right away, stay positive and keep trying over time. Encouraging kids to take just one bite of a new food can help. But avoid creating conflicts and stress over it. "Trying a new food can be exciting and also stressful in general," Lumeng says. "Several studies show that kids are more likely to try a new food if they're eating in a setting that's relaxing and pleasant."

Children under the age of 3 tend to stop eating on their own when they're full. "But after age 3," Lumeng says, "the more you put on their plate, the more they'll eat." So make sure to give your kids child-size portions.

Take opportunities to teach young children about feelings of fullness. "If



### Web Links

For more about healthy family habits, click the "Links" tab at:

<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/issue/Feb2013/Feature1>

your child asks for another helping, instead of saying, 'No, honey, you've had enough,' try saying something like, 'You must really be hungry tonight,' to raise their awareness of their feelings," Lumeng suggests. "Or when they stop eating, say, 'Oh, you must feel full now,' to help teach about hunger and feeling satisfied."

Several studies show that parents can effectively influence healthy behaviors by talking in a positive way or avoiding certain situations altogether. "Instead of telling your children, 'No, you can't have any more cookies,' just keep cookies out of the house altogether," says Lumeng.

When you bring unhealthy food and sugary drinks into the house, "parents essentially become the food police," adds Epstein. "It's easier to create an environment in the home where there's limited access to unhealthy foods and lots of access to healthy foods."

Experts recommend that most kids get at least an hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day. Parents can help by limiting TV and computer time to no more than 1 or 2 hours per day.

"Small changes in the home environment can also have a huge effect on physical activity," says Epstein. You can make sports equipment like balls and jump ropes more accessible by putting them next to the door. Walking fast, bicycling, jumping rope, and playing basketball, soccer or hopscotch are all good ways for kids to be active.

When it comes to food and physical activity, what you say and do around your children can have a lasting effect. Work together as a family to make healthy habits easy and fun. ■

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# Chew on This

## Healthy Teeth for Baby and Beyond

Teeth help us bite, chew, speak clearly and smile. Even babies need healthy teeth. But teeth need proper care to stay healthy and strong. It's never too early to start kids on the path to good dental health.

Diet plays a role in tooth decay. When you eat or drink foods that contain sugar, germs in your mouth use the sugar to make acids. Over time, the acids can cause tooth decay, or **cavities**. Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease in children, yet it's mostly preventable.

Although baby teeth eventually fall out, it's still important to take care of them. They play an important role in the mouth. "Baby teeth of course are used to chew, but they also guide growth of the jaw bones and create room for permanent teeth to come in," says Dr. Tim lafolla, a dental health expert at NIH.

"Start cleaning your baby's mouth even before the first teeth come in, so your baby gets used to having his or her mouth cleaned. Wipe gums with a clean, soft cloth," says

lafolla. "When teeth come in, clean them twice a day with a cloth or soft brush, as they are immediately susceptible to tooth decay and **plaque**."

One important way to protect baby teeth is not putting your baby to bed with a bottle. Milk, formula and juice all contain sugar. If sugary liquids stay on your baby's teeth too long, it can lead to tooth decay. If you give your baby a bottle to keep at bedtime or to carry around between feedings, fill it only with water.

"It's important to catch tooth decay early," lafolla says. He recommends bringing your child to the dentist by age 1. The dentist can tell if teeth are coming in properly, detect early signs of decay, and give you tips on caring for your child's teeth.

The best defense against tooth decay is fluoride, a mineral found in most tap water. If your water doesn't have fluoride, ask a dentist about fluoride drops, gel or varnish.

Start using fluoride toothpaste at about age 2. lafolla recommends using just a pea-sized drop of fluoridated toothpaste until kids have the ability to spit and rinse.

Young kids need help brushing their teeth properly. Try brushing their teeth first and letting them finish. You might try using a timer or a favorite song so your child learns to brush for 2 minutes. Continue to



supervise brushing until your child is 7 or 8 years old.

Have kids brush their teeth at least twice daily: in the morning, at bedtime, and preferably after meals.

Offer healthy foods and snacks to children. If kids do eat sugary or sticky foods, they should brush their teeth afterward.

Also ask your child's dentist about sealants—a simple, pain-free way to prevent tooth decay. These thin plastic coatings are painted on the chewing surfaces of permanent back teeth. They quickly harden to form a protective shield against germs and food. If a small cavity is accidentally covered by a sealant, the decay won't spread because germs trapped inside are sealed off from their food supply.

By following these tips, you can help your children develop healthy dental habits for life. ■



### Wise Choices Caring for Kids' Teeth

- Check and clean your baby's teeth with a cloth or soft toothbrush.
- Don't put your baby to bed with a bottle. Or, if you do, fill it with water.
- Take your child to the dentist by age 1.
- Start putting a drop of fluoride toothpaste on your child's toothbrush at about age 2.
- Feed your child healthy foods.
- Ask your dentist about sealants to protect children's teeth.
- Brush teeth at least twice every day, and preferably after meals.



### Definitions

#### Cavities

Small holes in teeth caused by decay.

#### Plaque

Sticky, colorless film that can lead to tooth decay and gum disease.



### Web Links

For more information about healthy teeth for children, click the "Links" tab at:

<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/issue/Feb2013/Feature2>



# Health Capsules

For links to more information, see these stories online:  
<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/issue/Feb2013/Capsule1>

## Therapy Shows Promise for Peanut Allergy

An experimental therapy may one day make life easier for people with peanut allergy, who now need to avoid all foods containing peanuts.

Food allergies are caused by your immune system, which normally protects your body from harmful germs. When you're allergic, the immune system responds to a harmless substance as if it were a threat. Symptoms can range from hives and itching to a life-threatening reaction called anaphylaxis.

Peanuts are one of the most common foods to cause allergic reactions in both children and adults. The only way to prevent symptoms is to completely avoid peanuts and all products made with them. But that's not easy to do.

An NIH-funded research team tested an approach called sublingual immunotherapy to treat peanut allergy. The therapy involves placing a small amount of liquid under the tongue and then swallowing it.

The researchers enrolled 40 people (ages 12 to 37) who had peanut allergy. They were randomly assigned to receive either sublingual immunotherapy or an inactive placebo.

After 44 weeks, 14 of the 20 treated patients (70%) could safely swallow at least 10 times more peanut powder than they could at the start of the study. Only 3 of the 20 (15%) taking placebo could similarly increase their dose safely. After 68 weeks of therapy, patients could swallow even more peanut powder.

"Immunotherapy continues to show promise for treating food allergies, but it is not yet ready for widespread use," says study co-leader Dr. David Fleischer of National Jewish Health in Denver. "This is an experimental treatment—promising, but with potentially serious side effects." The researchers are now working to improve the technique.

Several other trials are testing oral immunotherapy for food allergy. But if you're allergic, don't try any type of immunotherapy on your own. You could have a dangerous reaction. ■

## Relaxation Techniques for Stress?

When we sense danger, our bodies quickly raise our heart rate and focus our attention. Stress is crucial to survival. But over the long term, too much can contribute to health problems, including heart disease, digestive disorders and headaches.

Researchers are exploring whether relaxation techniques can counteract the effects of stress. These techniques often combine breathing and focused attention to calm the mind and body. They are generally safe, but so far there's only limited evidence that they can help with specific health conditions. NIH supports several studies to learn more about how relaxation

techniques can affect our health.

Relaxation techniques include progressive relaxation, biofeedback, guided imagery, self-hypnosis and deep-breathing exercises. They're best combined with good nutrition, regular exercise and a strong social support system.

You can learn and practice many relaxation techniques on your own. Most require only brief instruction before you can do them.

Talk to your health care provider if you're thinking about trying a relaxation technique for a particular health condition. Relaxation techniques aren't a replacement for medical care. ■



### Featured Website Check Up on Your Bones

[www.bones.nih.gov/checkup](http://www.bones.nih.gov/checkup)

Are your bones healthy and strong? Learn more about osteoporosis with this interactive Web tool. Answer a set of questions, and the site will identify factors that put you at risk for bone loss. This easy-to-use website even suggests ways to improve your bone health.



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