Healthy Eating – A Pattern for Life

Healthy eating and nutrition are the basis for healthy minds and bodies for life. Healthy eating plays a significant role in child development and growth while nutrition education is key to learning healthy eating habits. These positive patterns in life can prevent chronic disease, lead to better educational experiences, and support healthy behaviors throughout life.

Without early education on proper nutrition, children and their families may not be aware of the impact that a poor diet has on health and learning. Studies show that children who have poor nutrition are more likely to have a lower immune response leading to illness and missed days of school. Students often suffer academically, as well as spread illness to other children at school.

Childhood obesity is also a health issue and an early sign of improper nutrition. Obesity has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the past 30 years with nearly 1 in 3 children in the U.S. classified as overweight or obese. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans associates overweight and obesity with a higher risk of type 2 diabetes, certain cancers, osteoporosis, and cardiovascular disease, among other chronic illnesses.

Nutrition not only impacts health, but there is also a significant link between nutrition and the behavior of children. This is not just the old saying “sugar makes children hyperactive” – there is a definite link between junk food with low nutrients and behavior. Studies show that children who have poor eating habits and regularly consume non-nutritive foods (chips, processed foods, cakes, candy, sugary cereals) have more anger issues, discipline problems in school, and lower psychological well-being than children who are fed a nutritious diet. Supporting this study, eligible children participating in the National School Breakfast nutrition program, established in 1975, show improved rates of attendance, behavior, concentration in class, and academic performance.

Children spend, on average, more than 6 hours a day in a learning environment and consume about half of their daily calories at school. The focus of nutrition education in most school programs is choosing healthy foods, but not necessarily why eating healthy is so important. Despite the knowledge being provided to children about choosing healthy foods, a recent study showed up to 40% of daily calories for children and adolescents age 2–18 years were unhealthy choices of empty calories from added sugars and solid fats. About half of these empty calories came from six sources at schools and at home: soda, fruit
drinks, dairy desserts, grain desserts, pizza, and whole milk, and most youth do not drink enough water daily.

With a steady increase in preventable diseases and behavioral issues with children, now more than ever, is the time to focus on improving the quality of nutrition education for growing children and their families. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention promotes nutrition education as a cost-effective, evidence-based approach to improve child health and promote life-long healthy eating habits.

One nutrition and education program for qualified families with children age 0-5 or pregnant women is WIC (Women, Infants, and Children.) This program promotes breastfeeding, provides nutrition education, and supplements food items to promote prenatal and early childhood health.

A school-focused nutrition program is the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child project. This program focuses on enhancing nutrition education at schools. Schools are encouraged to integrate nutrition into the required curriculum, as well as work with cafeteria staff to eliminate junk food and sweetened beverages. To reinforce the benefits of a healthy diet, the program also includes a physical education piece that goes hand-in-hand with nutrition to build strong muscles and bones, address healthy weight, and improve behavior.

A community approach to nutrition education can help all of us ensure a healthy foundation. As individuals in our community, we need to support basic nutrition guidelines:

- Promote breastfeeding of babies. Breast milk contains the vitamins and nutrients babies need and is packed with disease-fighting substances.
- Increase fruits and vegetables. Fresh is always a great choice.
- Swap refined grains like white bread, white rice, white pasta for whole grains. Look for “whole wheat” as a part of the first ingredient.
- Lower intake of processed meats like bacon, salami, cured meats.
- Eliminate added sugars like corn syrup, sugar, honey, molasses, and sweeteners. Check the ingredient list to help you reduce these items.
- Reduce salt intake. Try using herbs, spices, vinegar, or citrus to flavor foods instead.
- Add exercise to boost nutritional benefits and improve overall health.
- Support policies that promote health and nutrition at home, at school, and in our daily lives.

For a healthy foundation for life, support teaching healthy eating!

For important information on public health issues, visit the Peoria City/County Health Department website at [www.pcchd.org](http://www.pcchd.org).

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The Peoria City/County Health Department continues efforts to improve community health in Peoria County with the overarching goal “to increase the number of people who are healthy at every stage of life.”