
Healthy eating for adolescent girls

Eating healthy food is important at any age, but it's especially important for teenagers. As your body is still growing, you need to eat good-quality food and the right kinds to meet your energy and nutrition needs.

Why eat healthily?

As a teenager, you'll start to become more independent and make your own food choices. You'll hang out with your friends or maybe get a part time job, so you can buy the food you like. But because you are still growing, you need some important vitamins and minerals. Take extra care to choose food that provides all the nutrients you need to keep you feeling good and healthy.

How your body image can affect what you eat

Your body image is how you perceive your body to be, and how you think and feel about it. Your body image can affect your self-esteem and self-acceptance, and it can also affect what you eat.

Everyone's body shape is different. People can weigh exactly the same but have a completely different body shape. Your genes determine your height and your muscle and bone structure, it's what you're born with and can't be changed.

When you're a teenage girl, there can be pressure from friends or family to be or look a certain way. And the media continuously bombards you with images of the 'ideal' woman, who has often been airbrushed and Photoshopped. It's hard not to aspire to what you are told is the physical ideal.

Dieting can be a tempting way to try to control your body shape.

The low-down on dieting

There is a lot of confusing and contradictory information out there about dieting and nutrition. How many diets are there? How many really work? Many popular diets make your body think it's being starved and so it responds by making you want to eat more – ultimately you end up putting on weight!

Fad diets are just that – a fad. They are unsustainable and often don't contain enough nutrients for good health. If the diet cuts out whole food groups or contains only one food group, such as vegetables, then it is a short-term fix and after a while you'll probably be back at square one.

The sensible answer to losing excess body fat is to make small, healthy changes to your eating and exercise habits. By making these changes part of your lifestyle, you'll lose weight and keep it off.

For information on healthy weight loss, see [Weight loss – a healthy approach](#) and [Body image and diets](#).

Eating for a healthy weight

When you eat too much food, there is too much energy and your body stores this as fat. Being careful about how much food you eat and how many sweet drinks you drink can help you maintain a healthy weight.

Eat three regular meals a day with some snacks – this will help you meet your nutritional and energy needs. And eat to appetite – that is, eat when you are hungry and stop when you are full.

Try not to skip meals, or you'll miss out on important vitamins, minerals and carbohydrates, which can leave you lacking energy or finding it hard to concentrate. For more information about the relationship between food and energy, see [Balancing energy in and energy out](#).

Healthy eating guidelines for adolescent girls

The Australian Dietary Guidelines for girls aged 14 to 18 provide a good guide of what and how much to eat to achieve a healthy weight. If you follow a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle, [plan your diet](#) to be sure it includes all the essential nutrients.

Food group	Vitamins and minerals	Number of serves per day
Breads and cereals	B vitamins Magnesium Zinc Fibre	7
Fruit and vegetables	Fibre Folic acid or folate Beta-carotene Vitamin C Magnesium Potassium	2 fruit 5 vegetables
Meat, eggs, nuts, legumes, pulses	Protein Iron Zinc Vitamin B12	2.5
Dairy foods	Protein Calcium Magnesium Zinc Potassium	3.5
Oils and fats	Vitamin A Vitamin D Vitamin E Vitamin K	Use in small amounts

Foods to have sometimes

It's easy to grab a biscuit, some chips, a sausage roll or a chocolate bar when you're hungry, but eating these foods regularly will make it easier for you to gain weight. These types of convenience, takeaway and fried foods should only be enjoyed occasionally.

Here are some ideas for what to eat instead:

- chocolate bar (50g) – try a low-fat chocolate milk (250ml)
- lolly – try dried fruit
- large latte or cappuccino – try a small latte or cappuccino
- ice cream – try low-fat frozen yogurt or sorbet
- high-sugar breakfast cereal – try high-fibre breakfast cereal
- hot chips – try a baked potato
- large soft drink – try a small soft drink, diet soft drink or water with lemon or lime
- chicken schnitzel – try barbeque or roast chicken
- burger meal deal – try a burger and water, or small soft drink or diet drink
- doughnut – try a fruit scone
- fried egg and bacon sandwich – try a poached egg and ham in an English muffin.

Alcohol and teenagers

There's plenty of research to show that drinking alcohol can cause serious short- and long-term harm. Alcohol is a drug. It causes health problems that accumulate over a lifetime. If you are under 18, you are strongly advised to avoid drinking any alcohol, as it can interfere with your growing brain.

Find out more about **Alcohol and teenagers**.

Eating disorders

A distorted body image can lead to self-destructive behaviours such as dieting and binge-eating. These behaviours can predispose teenagers to the development of eating disorders.

Eating disorders are a type of illness. They usually start in adolescence. The two most serious are anorexia nervosa (anorexia) and bulimia nervosa (bulimia). Anorexia is characterised by an intense fear of being fat and a relentless pursuit of thinness. Bulimia is characterised by binge eating and purging.

Anorexia and bulimia are both treatable, but they can be life-threatening if severe and left untreated. It's therefore essential to identify early warning signs – such as abnormal eating patterns, ongoing loss of weight, and preoccupation with thinness and dieting – and get help as soon as possible.

See **Anorexia nervosa** and **Bulimia nervosa** for more information.

Where to get help for eating disorders

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- A GP with experience supporting people with an eating disorder
- **Eating Disorders Victoria Helpline** (Tel. 1300 550 236 – support from Monday to Friday, 9.30 am to 5.00 pm)
- Community health centre
- **Lifeline** (Tel. 13 11 14)
- **Kids Helpline** (Tel. 1800 55 1800)
- **Butterfly Foundation's National Support Line** Tel. 1800 ED HOPE (1800 33 4673) – support from 8 am to 12 am, 7 days a week (except national public holidays)

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