

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Steven L. Smith, DC

Fight Childhood Obesity With Real Food

The World Health Organization calls childhood obesity “one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century”. Worldwide, an estimated 42 million children under age five are overweight. In the United States alone, one-third of children and adolescents — about 25 million — are overweight or obese. Dr. Smith is extremely concerned about this statistic.

The good news is that childhood obesity is both preventable and reversible. Read on to learn more about specific food choices suggested by Dr. Smith. These suggestions can keep your child in optimal health and put the brakes on the obesity epidemic.

Processed Foods and Modern Obesity

Our bodies are made to retain extra calories as fat — a feature that serves us well if food is scarce. However, the modern Western diet includes a glut of high-calorie, low-nutrient manufactured foods that interfere with the body’s innate ability to regulate its weight. These foods are less filling than whole foods, which easily leads to overconsumption. This may explain

why today’s preschooler consumes 182 more calories a day than his or her parents did at the same age (*Health Aff* 2010;29:398-404).

Processed foods are notoriously high in sugars, particularly processed fructose, usually in the form of high fructose corn syrup. This form of fructose has only become a major part of our diets in modern times, and the body metabolizes it differently from other sugars. The liver converts fructose into, among other substances, fat. Excessive fructose consumption also increases your child’s risk of developing type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease (*Physiol Rev* 2010;90:23-46).

Processed foods marketed for children are often a nutritional nightmare. In

Great Britain, the Children’s Food Campaign inspected 107 baby and toddler foods last year. They found that half contained troublingly high levels of sugar and saturated fat. Products for older children fare as badly. For instance, breakfast cereals marketed to children tend to be higher in calories and sugar than “adult” cereals, and two-thirds of them would not meet the nutritional guidelines for foods served in schools (*J Am Diet Assoc* 2008;108:702-5).

In addition to regular physical activity, Dr. Smith counsels patients young and old to avoid processed foods and embrace a nutrient-rich diet of what proponents call “real food”.

Breastfeed for a Smart Start

Give your child an ideal start for a lifetime of optimal health by choosing breastfeeding over formula feeding. It is well documented that “breast is best” when it comes to infant nutrition, and here is one more reason why: Breastfed babies are less likely to grow up as obese children.

Research shows that the first months of life are the most critical period for setting the stage for a lifetime of healthy weight (*Clin Pediatr* 2010; Epub). Breastfed babies gain weight more slowly than their formula-fed peers, protecting them from the predisposition to metabolic syndrome that comes with accelerated infant weight gain. Formula feeding is associated with increased risk of obesity — and associated health problems — throughout childhood (*J Perinat Educ* 2009;18:32-9). The World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months.



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Choose Drinks Carefully

Soft drinks are a common source of excess sugar in many children's diets. In a survey of Australian youths ages 11 to 16, over half of boys and over a third of girls said that they drink soft drinks daily (*Asia Pac J Clin Nutr* 2009;18:447-52). Soft-drink consumption is associated with higher body weight in study after study. Other sweetened beverages popular with children and adolescents, such as sports drinks and fruit-flavored drinks, are equally culpable in weight gain (*Physiol Behav* 2010; Epub).

Offer your child healthy alternatives to sugary drinks, such as water, milk and iced herbal tea with no more than a touch of honey. Note that while 100 percent fruit juice generally contains more nutrients than drinks with added sugar, it is equally high in naturally occurring sugar and lacks the fiber of whole fruit. Limit consumption to no more than six ounces (180 mL) of 100 percent fruit juice daily for children ages one to six. Try mixing juice with an equal amount of water, or add a splash of juice to seltzer for a refreshing quencher with the fizzy appeal of a soft drink.



Limit Exposure to Marketing

Much of the commercial success of processed foods is due to billions spent on marketing, a skyrocketing percentage of which is designed to entice children and adolescents. One

study shows that children as young as three can identify and differentiate between many brand logos including those for fast food and soft drinks (*Psych Marketing* 2010;27:203-28).

While it may be impossible to shelter children from all marketing in our ad-saturated culture, parents can limit exposure particularly by regulating television time. Children who watch more than two hours a day of television are more likely to be overweight, particularly if they view commercials for unhealthy foods (*J Phys Act Health* 2009;6:S28-35). Talk with your children about the advertisements they do see and teach them to be media-savvy young consumers.

Make Whole Foods a Family Affair

The doctor encourages patients to make healthy, nourishing food a priority for the whole family, not just children. Your own eating patterns and weight have an astounding impact on those of your children. Kids with obese parents are 25 times more likely to develop obesity themselves (*Indian J Pediatr* 2010; Epub).

On the other hand, kids who see their parents enjoy fruits and vegetables are likely to do the same (*Public Health Nutr* 2009;12:267-83). The simple act of sharing family dinner at home, combined with limited time in front of the TV and adequate sleep, reduces the rate of obesity by 40 percent in preschoolers (*Pediatrics* 2010; Epub).

Make Whole Foods Fun

Even the pickiest eater is more receptive to new foods if given a role in choosing and preparing them. Children and adolescents who participate in grocery shopping and meal preparation eat more fruits and vegetables and consume less fat (*Obesity* 2010; 18:S69-74). Take your child along to the grocery store or farmer's market to choose a new vegetable to try at dinner or a fruit for the week's snacks.

And don't underestimate the allure of

healthy foods presented whimsically, such as cheese cut into fun shapes or salad arranged in a smiley face. Children are more likely to eat food that is visually appealing (*Appetite* 2010; Epub).



Tend a Family Garden

Gardening is another fun way to get children excited about whole foods. Garden-based nutrition education is a popular trend in schools, and numerous studies show that children who get hands-on experience planting, maintaining, and harvesting fruits and vegetables eat more of them (*J Nutr Educ Behav* 2009;41:212-7; *J Am Diet Assoc* 2009;109:273-80). The doctor suggests planting a garden at home with your children, even if it is just a couple of pots of tomatoes on the patio. Or, visit a local farm or "u-pick" berry patch to make real food an exciting adventure.

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