Making the case for good nutrition

There's no doubt about it – eating a healthy diet is important so that kids get the nutrients they need to be healthy and grow strong. It’s also key to maintaining a healthy weight. But aside from these facts, there is also sound evidence as to why teaching kids about nutrition should be as important to teachers as it is to parents.

Emerging evidence suggests an association between being overweight and lower academic achievement. It could be that this is related to absenteeism, which has been clearly and directly linked to poorer academic performance. Being overweight can contribute to a variety of chronic medical conditions in school-aged children, including the following:

- Asthma
- High blood pressure
- Depression
- Joint problems
- High cholesterol
- Sleep apnea

Overweight students may also face physical, psychological, and/or social problems that are directly related to their weight and can lead to academic challenges.

Despite the benefits of healthy eating and maintaining a healthy weight, too many American kids are overweight or obese. The following statistics demonstrate just how serious this problem is:

- 17% of youth in the United States were obese in 2011–2014.¹
- In 2011–2014, the prevalence of obesity was 20.5% among adolescents ages 12 to 19.¹²
- If current trends continue, the number of overweight or obese infants and young children globally will increase to 70 million by 2025.³

What is contributing to obesity trends?

Lifestyle changes

Unfortunately, there are many things working against our children’s health, contributing to poor diets and increasing numbers of overweight or obese youth. Among them:

- More parents work outside the home and, as a result, families are eating out more often. Fast food meals tend to be less nutritious and higher in calories than what’s made at home.
- Restaurant and fast-food portion sizes have dramatically increased, and so has the number of calories we consume with these meals.
- Empty calories from added sugars and solid fats make up about 40% of the daily calorie intake for children and teens ages 2 to 18 years. This affects the overall quality of their diets. About half of these empty calories come from six sources: soda, fruit drinks, dairy desserts, grain desserts, pizza, and whole milk.³

²United States. CDC. Obesity, Halting the Epidemic by Making Health Easier, At A Glance 2011
³United States. CDC. Childhood Nutrition Facts (2017); https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/nutrition/facts.htm
• School-age children are eating very few vegetables and fruits, with low intakes of whole grains and high intakes of sodium, solid fats, and added sugars.³

• Of the more than $200 billion spent by children and youth collectively each year, the top four items selected by children ages 8 to 12 (without parental permission) are high-calorie and low-nutrient foods and beverages.¹

• Food and beverages – specifically candy, soda, and salty snacks or chips – were ranked among the top items that teens ages 13 to 17 buy with their own money.⁴

### 2 Advertising and marketing

The early years of a child’s life is a good time to learn to make healthy decisions about what they consume. Because commercial advertising is used to influence their decisions, it is important to equip young people to discern messaging – and to help them make responsible decisions.

• There is extensive food advertising and marketing of low-nutrient, high-calorie foods and beverages on TV, the internet, food packages, and even in schools.

• Based on actual dollars spent in 2009, child- and teen-directed advertising is most often done to market fast-food restaurants, carbonated beverages, breakfast cereal, and snack foods.⁵

### How teachers can help

While healthy eating begins at home, the food and beverages available at school can also have a big impact on a child's health. Working together, we can encourage kids and their families to eat better and make changes at school, at home, and in their communities – making it easier for children to lead healthy lives now and into adulthood.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Overweight kids are more likely to be severely obese in adulthood, which can raise their risk for cancer and many other dangerous health problems as they age.
Eating well is also important to help kids to do their best in school – and in life. The American Cancer Society urges teachers like you to support your students on their journey to wellness.

Here’s how:

1 **Know the facts**

Schools can help kids eat healthy by promoting the American Cancer Society’s guidelines for nutrition:

- Eat a healthy diet, with an emphasis on plant sources.
- Choose foods and drinks in proper serving measures.
- Limit intake of processed and red meats.
- Eat at least 2 ½ cups of a variety of vegetables and fruits every day.
- Choose whole grains over processed (refined) grains.

Choosing foods based on these guidelines will help both children and adults stay at a healthy weight, which is an important factor for improving overall health and reducing cancer risk.

2 **Encourage a healthy lifestyle**

Supplemental materials can be found as part of this packet or on our website, [cancer.org/schools](http://cancer.org/schools). The objective(s) of the classroom activity sheets include:

- Increasing knowledge of students, teachers, and parents regarding the need for physical activity among kids.
- Empowering students to become agents of change in their homes and within their communities as they plan and execute physical activity efforts.
- Helping students discover the ways in which their social environment impacts their perception of health.

In addition to the material mentioned above, we have also included useful notes on ways you can adopt and encourage healthy habits at your Schools vs Cancer events. Also, we are sharing links to sites where you can find more inspiration for supporting this journey to wellness.
EATING A HEALTHY DIET is important for academic performance. Students who are well-nourished tend to be better students, while poorly nourished children tend to not perform as well and score lower on standardized achievement tests.

SKIPPING BREAKFAST can interfere with learning, even in well-nourished children. Numerous studies have found that increased participation in school breakfast programs is associated with increases in academic test scores, daily attendance, and class participation; it has also been linked to reductions in absences and tardiness. Both parents and teachers report that students participating in these breakfast programs are calmer in class and have more energy for studying.

HUNGRY CHILDREN and those at risk for being hungry are also more likely to see a psychologist and be suspended from school. Teachers report higher levels of hyperactivity among this group.

POOR NUTRITION can lead to decreased resistance to infection. Consequently, kids are more likely to become sick and miss school, which can negatively impact academic achievement.
Classroom Activities

The following are activity ideas that could be included in current lesson plans.

My meal plan

Home: Students create a meal plan for one day utilizing the USDA’s “my plate” diagram. (See choosemyplate.gov.) Ask them to include the nutrition information for each meal selection.

School: This project may be completed in groups for a 5-day meal plan.

Make ‘my plate’ activities

Students may utilize the USDA’s “my plate” illustration and create their own reference guide by using a white paper plate. They could draw the portion sizes and color in the different nutritional needs, such as protein, vegetables, and grains.

Option 1: For one day, or even a week, have students write down everything they eat (including snacks, meals, drinks, etc.). Then show them the new nutrition plate and discuss the different food groups and proportions in each area. After the discussion, have the kids compare their eating habits to the recommended food plate.

Option 2: Have students separate everything they ate the day before into the different food groups of the plate. Have them estimate how many portions they ate, too. Then ask them where they are doing really well, where they are lacking, and what they can do to change their diet to match the nutrition plate.

Option 3: Have students write down their favorite foods and put them into the correct sections of the nutrition plate. Discuss healthy snacks that can be eaten instead of junk food.

Option 4: Have students write down, draw, and/or bring in their favorite healthy food. It can be anything from a snack to a whole meal. The student should be able to talk about the benefits of the food item(s) they choose.

Option 5: Have each student study the new nutrition plate guidelines and design a week’s worth of healthy, nutritious meals, including breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Additional Activities

- Create a video in which each student expresses their favorite healthy nutrition habit. Each student could announce, “I choose __________ instead of __________” (e.g., steamed broccoli instead of canned veggies). Allow students to share a copy of the video on their social media pages.
• Ask local grocery store to conduct a taste test of healthy foods and provide coupons for parents, along with recipe cards.

• Talk about portion sizes (reading labels, measuring standard serving sizes, etc.). Have students measure what they think is a standard serving of popular foods (cereal, pasta, etc.) and compare to standard serving sizes. Discuss how they think this impacts how much they eat and their overall health. Print these resources for students to reference:


• Teach students to engage in healthy debates. Present a topic similar to this one: “Fruits and vegetables are a key factor for excellent performance in school.” Use this resource guide to organize the activity, and have fun being the note-taking judge.

Activities

• Play alphabet toss! Have a group of students make a circle and name fruits and vegetables they like from A to Z. (Each player should name an item immediately after receiving the ball from the preceding player.) For example, the first person will name a food item that begins with the letter “A.” After receiving the ball from the first player, the second player will name a food item that begins with the letter “B,” and so on. Tell students, “Don’t hesitate, or you will be eliminated from the game.”

• Play nutrition bingo or Jeopardy.

• Tell students to form a large circle and sit down. Take this opportunity to briefly talk to them about the importance of healthy eating. Tell them that you are going to call out healthy foods. If they eat the food item often, they should stand, and vice versa. Challenge students by changing up the pace.

• Ask local restaurants or well-known chefs to come and do a food demonstration and/or have a taste-testing.

• Announce special nutrition-themed laps throughout the event. Invite the following people to walk a lap:
  – Anyone currently eating a fruit or vegetable
  – Anyone who usually eats at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day
  – Anyone who has made positive changes in their eating habits
  – Anyone who has asked for healthier foods at their workplace, school, place of worship, or at a restaurant

Celebrating nutrition at your Schools vs Cancer event

The American Cancer Society Schools vs Cancer event is a great time to promote healthy living! Participants are walking. They’re running. They’re eating. They’re drinking. Take the time to plan some fun events and make announcements that encourage all your Schools vs Cancer participants to eat their way to better health!
– Anyone who ate a healthy breakfast that day
– Anyone who has eaten a fruit or vegetable for a snack that day

• Make general announcements throughout the event, such as:
  – Eat your way to good health!
  – Eating well and being active can help you stay well and reduce your risk of cancer and heart disease.
  – Eating well and being active help you look good and feel good!

• Ask participants to remember these guidelines:
  – Watch your weight.
  – Get regular physical activity.
  – Eat a healthy diet.

• Remind participants that the best thing to do to stay well and reduce your risk of cancer is to avoid smoking. The next best thing? Eat better and be active!
  – Eat more fruits and vegetables – at least 2 ½ cups every day!
  – Fruits and vegetables with the most color are the most nutritious!
  – Fight cancer by eating more fruits and vegetables!

For Parents: Help your child eat well

We all want to do everything we can to make sure our kids get a good start on healthy eating habits for life. Good nutrition is important to help kids grow well and be healthy, and it can even help them do better in school.

It’s also important to develop healthy habits early, as the habits we develop as children tend to stay with us through adulthood. And healthy eating habits throughout life can help our kids stay healthy and reduce their risk of developing chronic diseases such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes in the future.

Helping kids and families maintain a healthy diet is important to the American Cancer Society because of the impact that eating well has on cancer risk. Our nutrition guidelines can help improve the health of your family. **Get started by following these five guidelines:**

1. Eat a healthy diet, with an emphasis on plant foods.

2. Choose foods and drinks in amounts that help you get to and stay at a healthy weight.

3. Eat at least 2 ½ cups of fruits and vegetables each day.

4. Choose whole grains instead of refined grain products.

5. Limit intake of processed meats (like hot dogs, bologna, and deli meats) and red meat (beef, pork).

Choosing foods based on these guidelines and adopting a physically active lifestyle will help children and adults maintain a healthy weight – another important factor for improving overall health and reducing cancer risk.
Follow these tips to help get (and keep) your kids on the path to lifelong healthy eating:

**Follow the leader.** First and foremost, be a good role model for healthy eating. Parents who eat well tend to have children who eat well. Be sure your kids see you eating a wide variety of healthy foods, including fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

**Taste the rainbow.** Offer your kids a variety of different foods each day, and don't give up if they turn up their nose the first time around. It may take kids multiple times of trying something new for them to figure out they like it! Kids may find it exciting if you encourage them to select new fruits and veggies on each trip to the market; ask them to target a specific color each time.

**Keep it interesting.** Prepare foods in different ways. While your kids might not like cooked spinach, fresh spinach might be OK. Maybe they don't like the texture of baked sweet potatoes, but crispy baked sweet potato fries may have them asking for more.

**Keep them within reach.** Keep healthy snacks available and in easy-to-reach places. Think baby carrots in the refrigerator, a bowl of apples on the counter, or frozen 100% juice bars in the freezer.

**Bring out the inner chef.** Have your kids help plan and prepare meals and shop for food. Let them pick a new recipe to try. Have them pick a new and different fruit or vegetable to eat each week. Get their help with mixing, pouring, and measuring.

**Go bananas!** Look for ways to add more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to their day. Slice a banana on top of their cereal, or whip up a smoothie for breakfast. Chop up peppers in their quesadillas. Make sandwiches with whole-wheat bread.

**Have a seat.** As much as possible, sit down to eat as a family. With crazy schedules and family members coming and going, this can be hard to do, but it will pay off many times over. Not only do meals eaten at home tend to be healthier than those eaten out, but family mealtime is a great time to catch up with each other and stay connected, too.