Building Healthy Eating Habits for Adolescents with ASD

The nutritional guidelines for individuals with autism are the same as those for the general population; however, many teens with autism face challenges related to food/eating that can negatively impact their health. These may include:

Picky Eaters
Many individuals with autism are picky eaters which puts them at risk of having nutritional deficiencies. Research has shown that individuals with autism are five times more likely than their peers to have issues with eating which can lead to a range of health problems including long-term chronic health issues such as poor bone growth and heart disease.

Being overweight
Obesity is common among individuals with autism, especially as they move through adolescence and into adulthood. Carrying excess weight can also lead to other health problems such as anxiety, asthma, and sleep problems.

Tips to Support Selective Eaters

- **Consult your physician**
  Be sure to talk with your doctor to rule out any food related medical problems. Gastrointestinal disorders or food allergies can be the reason that your teen chooses not to eat certain foods. Your doctor can also help with providing information about any nutritional deficiencies.
**Healthy Eating Habits**

- **Consult a speech and/or occupational therapist with feeding expertise.**
  Individuals with ASD may have difficulty eating due to sensory issues (e.g. food texture) and/or swallowing issues and these should be explored with related health professionals as well.

- **Encourage your teen to explore the food.**
  Take time to look, touch, and smell new foods before tasting them. Do not force a tasting at the first introduction of a food. Accepting a new food can be difficult, so remember to be patient.

- **Avoid using food as a reward.**
  Using desserts and treats as a reward to eating vegetables may not help your teen learn the importance of eating a balanced diet.

- **Encourage your teen to help with meal preparation.**
  Some teens are more open to trying new foods if they have had a hand in preparing them. Being an active participant in food preparation can promote independence skills that can be applied in other areas of your teen’s life (following directions/recipes, measurements, time, etc.).

- **Introduce only one new food at a time.**
  Try introducing the new food along with a favorite food. Some teens may be more willing to try the new food if they can mix it with a food that they like (e.g. peas mixed with brown or white rice).

- **Tips to Promote Healthy Eating**

  - **Aim to create a rainbow in your plate.**
    In other words, create a meal that includes fruits and vegetables in a variety of colors. Having many different colors of produce on your plate (red, green, yellow, orange, purple, white and blue) is not only pleasing to the eye, but also provides a broad range of nutrients.

  - **Get your teen involved with determining food shopping lists.**
    Encouraging the teen to be involved with shopping is one way you may be able to get more buy-in from a teen. Focus on purchasing items from the different food groups and plan well-balanced meals together.

  - **Offer choices.**
    All teens want to have some type of control over what they do. When possible, give your teen a variety of healthy choices at mealtime and snack time. Make items such as fresh fruits and vegetables or nuts and whole grain crackers easily accessible for snack time.

  - **Learn appropriate serving sizes.**
    Know the serving size for each of the food groups for your teen’s age and height. Use visual supports (example: measuring cups, plates with designated areas) to help reinforce serving sizes of foods.
Use The Healthy Eating Plate as a guide for creating healthy, balanced meals—whether served on a plate or packed in a lunch box.


Need inspiration?

Read an article about a teen chef with autism - Chase Bailey, teen chef:


- **Incorporate whole foods in meal and snack times.**
  Try to make meals and snacks from fresh, unprocessed foods (e.g. fresh vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains) and healthy beverages (e.g. water, 100% fruit juice, and milk) as much as possible. Reduce the number of processed and high sugar or sodium foods (e.g. candy, cookies, chips, soda, and fast food) available during the day. If your teen enjoys crunchy snacks, try substituting apple slices, carrot sticks or celery for potato chips.

- **Have regularly scheduled family meals.**
  Having dinner at the same time each evening with the entire family can be comforting for individuals with ASD. Aim to have family meal times that are calm and free of distractions (cell phones, TV, video games, etc.) as much as possible.

- **Serve your meals in courses beginning with vegetables.**
  Your teen is most hungry at the beginning of meals, so bring out the healthiest foods first, and then bring out preferred foods.

- **Model good eating habits.**
  You are your teen’s best role model, so model the good eating habits that you would like to see in your teen.
Resources

Choosemyplate.gov
A resource site that promotes dietary guidance. The site includes additional information about the five food groups, portion sizes, and nutritional guidelines with online tools for meal planning, recipes, and interactive nutrition games.

http://www.choosemyplate.gov/

Fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org
A website with information about how to incorporate more fresh fruits and vegetables into your diet. The site includes specific fruit and vegetable information, meal planning, recipes, and ways to get your kids involved in meal planning/preparation.

http://www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org/

Take Charge of Your Health: A Guide for Teenagers
A printable online booklet that offers teens information about healthy living. The book contains details about how teens can increase physical activity, how to read food labels and make healthy food choices.


References

Encouraging Picky Eaters with Autism to Try New Foods
http://www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org/

Food Selectivity and Sensory Sensitivity in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Nutritional Deficiencies and Overweight Prevalence Among Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Seven Ways to Help a Picky Eater with Autism