

autism at-a-glance

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Autism at-a-Glance
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(CSESA).



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Building Healthy Eating Habits for Adolescents with ASD

Autism at-a-Glance is a series of practitioner and family-friendly documents created by the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA) designed for high school staff members supporting students on the autism spectrum, as well as family members of adolescents with ASD. The purpose of the *Autism at-a-Glance* series is to provide a current summary of topics relevant to high school students with ASD as well as practical tips and resources for school and community personnel and family members.

This *Autism at-a-Glance* was designed to support high school staff and family members in supporting adolescents on the autism spectrum as they learn to establish healthy eating habits.

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 and/or eating that can negatively impact their health.

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 over weight

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.

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 (e.g. following directions/recipes, measurements, time).

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.

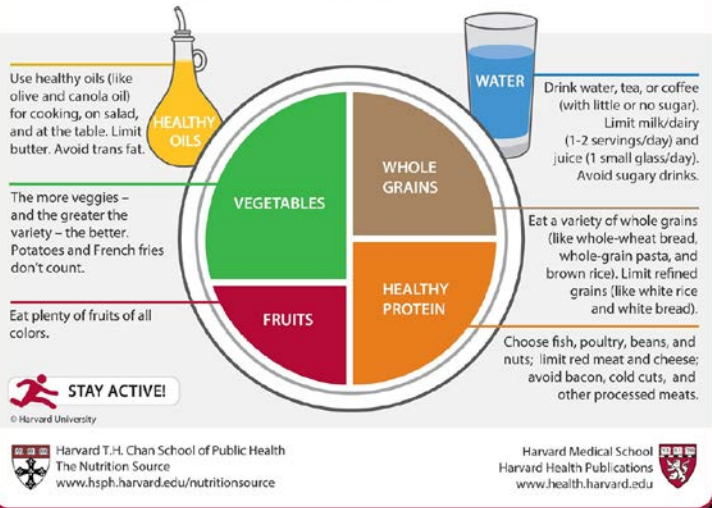
Offer choices

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 (e.g. measuring cups, plates with designated areas) to help reinforce serving sizes of foods.

HEALTHY EATING PLATE



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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.



Parent Resources

Use *The Healthy Eating Plate* as a guide for creating healthy, balanced meals—whether served on a plate or packed in a lunch box.

The Healthy Eating Plate

The Nutrition Source, Department of Nutrition, Harvard School of Public Health,
<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/>

Harvard Health Publications

www.health.harvard.edu

Need Inspiration?

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

Teen chef with autism turns his passion into a growing following

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/news/news-item/teen-chef-autism-turns-his-passion-growing-following>



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Resources

Choose My Plate

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.

United States Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). Choose MyPlate. Retrieved from <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/>

Fruits and Veggies, More Matters

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.

Fruits and Veggies, More Matters. (n.d.) Fruits and Veggies, More Matters. Retrieved from <https://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.

National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases. (2016, December 01). Take Charge of Your Health: A Guide for Teenagers. Retrieved from <https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/weight-management/take-charge-health-guide-teenagers>

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