**EATING HABITS**

*Teenagers eating habits are a problem for many parents. Concerns range from teenagers who eat too much, to those who refuse to eat anything they are offered. Meal times can become a source of conflict for families with teenagers sometimes want to eat at different times, in front of the TV or in their room. Poor eating habits in teenagers can also be related to how they feel about themselves. This tip sheet gives some suggestions on how to manage difficulties with teenagers eating habits.*

**HOW COMMON ARE EATING PROBLEMS?**

The years from 12 to 16 are crucial for your teenagers growth and development. Establishing good eating habits in the teenage years is important and can affect their health, fitness and general well being.

Over a quarter of teenage girls and one in theirteen boys report dieting to control weight. Almost 50% of girls and a quarter of boys report exercising to control their weight.

A small but significant proportion of teenagers report using more drastic measures to control their weight. This can include deliberately making themselves vomit after meals, or by regularly using laxatives or pills. Some teenagers engage in excessive exercise. In severe cases teenagers will refuse to eat, or eat so little that normal development ceases and their life is even at risk. Teenagers can develop a very distorted view of their own body shape. They may see themselves as being overweight when others can see that they are wasting away.

**WHY DO TEENAGERS DEVELOP EATING PROBLEMS?**

Each teenagers dietary needs differ depending on when they go through puberty, their body shape, and other characteristics they inherit from their parents. Many processed foods are deliberately made to taste good, so there is immediate pleasure while eating.

As a general rule, teenagers need to eat enough food (measured in calories) to match the energy they use up each day. During the teenage years, energy is required for growing as well as physical activity. This makes it difficult to work out how much your teenager should be eating to stay healthy. It can be difficult for parents to tell if their teenagers eating patterns are normal. During a growth spurt they may increase their food intake dramatically, and then eat a lot less after it is over. This is quite normal and should not be a cause for concern.

Not every teenager who is overweight or picky with their food will develop problem eating habits. However, parents need to be aware of their teenagers eating behaviour and look for warning signs.

**HOW TO FIND OUT IF YOUR TEENAGER HAS A BALANCED DIET**

* **Observe your teenagers eating habits**

If you are concerned about your teenagers eating habits, try to get an idea of what your teenager is eating and drinking over a few days. If possible, pick a week that does not include any unusual events when eating habits might be different, such as a party or academy trip. You may not be able to get a good record of what your teenager is eating when they are not with you, for example, when they are at school or at a friends home.**ENCOURAGING HEALTHY EATING**

* **Make mealtimes enjoyable**

Make sure that mealtimes are as pleasant as possible. Talk about topics that are interesting to your teenager. Do not just focus on what they did or plan to do at school. You may like to discuss what they are doing on the following day, or on the weekend. If you observe your teenager become fidgety or anxious when you require them to stay at the table, ask them about the cause. They may have homework to complete, or have promised to telephone a friend at a certain time.

Have meals at regular times when possible and set rules about when leaving is permitted. This will allow your teenager to plan other activities around meals, rather than to conflict with them. Even if it is not possible to have meals at the same time each day, it should be possible to set a weekly routine that you can follow most of the time. Discuss the routing with your teenager to ensure it does not conflict with other activities. Most teenagers respond well to a regular routine and will usually adapt once the rules are in place. For example, try to make sure they eat a regular healthy breakfast as this will provide them with the energy required for concentration at academy.

If your teenager breaks the rules about meal times, provide a logical consequences, such as requiring them to do extra washing up duty or going without dessert. If the problem persists, set up a behaviour contract to provide extra motivation to follow the rules.

**HOW TO DEAL WITH OVER EATING**

* **Talk to your teenager about their eating habits**

Include your teenager in discussing any plan to change their eating habits. Teenagers need to learn to take responsibility for their behaviour but they often need their parents help and guidance to do this. This is especially true when dealing with eating habits. Putting on weight is usually a gradual process and is often not seen as a problem until some time much later.

Point this out to teenagers in a friendly and informative way, and help them understand the importance of a balanced diet.

Aim to educate your teenager on the need for a healthy diet. Answer their questions, and plan together how to make any changes that are necessary. Do not expect your teenager to be able to do this on their own. You will need to help them. This will often involve changing eating habits and perhaps increasing some physical activity.

* **Review your shopping list**

It will be extremely difficult for your teenager to change their eating habits if everything in the refrigerator stays the same. You may need to agree to stop buying certain foods for a while, and to replace them with other foods that are not being eaten enough, such as fruit.

* **Have regular mealtimes**

One way to reduce snacking between meals is to set regular mealtimes and then do not allow any eating in the period before the mealtime.

**HOW TO MANAGE UNDER EATING**

* **Allow your teenager some control over their own food choices where possible**

As teenagers are on their way to becoming adults, it is sometimes a good idea to allow them to make decisions about how they will live their own lives. If your teenager eats enough different foods to ensure a balanced diet and the food they want is easy to find and within your budget, allow them to have their meals the way they want. This may mean preparing one meal for them and another for everyone else. In this case you may want to request that they help prepare their own meals as part of the deal.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOUR TEENAGER EATS TOO FAST**

* **Set some rules**

Teenagers eat their food very quickly for a number of reasons. These may include wanting to get an extra helping before anyone else; wanting to finish quickly so they can leave and get on with a preferred activity (such as the computer, TV or telephone); or wanting to finish because the meal time itself is unpleasant. In extreme cases, teenagers will eat quickly and then go and vomit to purge themselves so they do not put on weight.

Set some rules, such as *everyone must wait until the last person has finished their first course before having extra helpings or dessert,* or *Everyone must remain at the table until mum and dad have finished*.

Be prepared to try out a new rule to see how it works and change it if the results are not to your liking.

**POINTS TO REMEMBER**

Be prepared to seek professional help if you suspect that your teenage has lost a lot of weight or is using extreme measures to prevent weight gain, such as vomiting or using laxatives after meals. Losing a lot of weight can be a sign of serious emotional problems. Your teenage may require special assistance from a health professional experienced in dealing with eating disorders to overcome the problem.

**KEY STEPS**

* Observe your teenagers eating habits
* Make mealtimes enjoyable
* Talk to your teenager about their eating habits
* Review your shopping list
* Change everyones eating habits
* Have regular mealtimes
* Allow your teenager some choice
* Set some rules