



Not-So-Good Nutrition

FINDINGS ON DIET AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

From the March 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey
Arlington, Virginia

The choices that young people make today have a big impact on their health and well-being, now and in the future.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) asks young people about the behaviors and habits with the strongest links to their health.

This brochure takes a quick look at the findings on diet and weight management techniques from Arlington's March 2007 survey of middle and high school students.

WHY WORRY?

Teenagers are notorious for their unhealthy eating habits – seeming to exist solely on pizza, potato chips, and soda.

Poor eating habits are associated with obesity in children and, with it, increased risk of Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, orthopedic problems and even early signs of heart disease. Eating disorders or extreme dietary practices often associated (at least superficially) with weight control bring other risks such as kidney failure and heart conditions that can be fatal. In contrast, young people with healthy eating habits (especially those who also exercise regularly) seem to have better health, enjoy greater success in school, and feel better about themselves.

NOT ENOUGH CALCIUM

Most young people who meet recommended daily levels of calcium get it from drinking milk. Calcium is essential for strong bones and teeth and the body's ability to transmit nerve impulses, maintain a regular heart beat and other functions. Low-fat or non-fat milk is the recommended source because it provides other essential nutrients and is easily absorbed by the body.

So it is a real concern that 16 percent of young people completing the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) reported drinking no milk *at all* during the previous week. Only 19 percent reported drinking the recommended three or more glasses of milk per day. Milk consumption decreased with age – about 30 percent of sixth graders drink enough milk but only 12 percent of 12th graders. Boys (22 percent) were more likely than girls (16 percent) to report drinking three or more glasses per day, a pattern consistent with national statistics.

The busier you are, the more valuable mealtime is for your child.
-Dr. Lee Salk, Pediatrician (Quoted in [Kids are Worth It](#), B. Colorosa)

HOW WE DID THE SURVEY

These findings are based on a survey of about 2500 students enrolled in grades six, eight, ten and twelve in Arlington's public secondary schools. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Parents had an opportunity to opt out their child but less than two percent did. Eighty-six percent of students in the classes chosen for the survey filled out a questionnaire. Most of those who did not were absent from school.

TOO LITTLE FRUIT

A diet rich in fruits and vegetables has been linked to lower risk of cancer, stroke, heart attack and high blood pressure, among other benefits. However, these long-term health benefits are a tough sell to the here-and-now oriented youth of today. Still, it's surprising that 10 percent of Arlington youth report consuming *no* fruit in the previous week. And almost two-thirds report less than one serving per day of fruit juice.

These patterns help explain why only one third of youth in grades 8, 10 and 12 report eating the recommended number of servings of fruits and vegetables. Consumption of both fruit and fruit juice decline as young people get older.

OVERWEIGHT OR AT RISK

Scientists today use body-mass index to determine whether young people are overweight or at-risk for being overweight. This index takes into account both weight and height and differs between boys and girls and by age. Based on self-reported height and weight, 9 percent of youth students completing the YRBS are overweight and another 14 percent are at risk for being overweight.

Boys were more likely to be overweight than girls (10 vs 8 percent). However, girls were more likely to describe themselves as being overweight (27 vs 22 percent) and far more likely to report that they were trying to lose weight (53 vs 35 percent).

UNHEALTHY WEIGHT LOSS

Most young people trying to lose weight used exercise or eating less. However, thirteen percent of youth reported using one or more unhealthy methods of weight loss – fasting, vomiting, using laxatives or using diet pills or powders without a doctor's advice. Girls were somewhat more likely than boys to use such methods (14 percent vs 12 percent.) National data also suggest that girls are smoking cigarettes as a way to lose weight.

CHANGES SINCE 2004

There were few changes in dietary patterns, perceptions of being overweight or methods to lose weight since 2004, when the YRBS was last administered. Fewer youth (23 percent) are now overweight or at-risk than in 2004 (28 percent).

FOR PARENTS

Here are some tips for helping your child learn healthy eating patterns:

- Try to have a family meal together once a day or at least several times per week. Use these opportunities to stay connected and eat something nutritious.
- Make sure lots of healthy foods and snacks are available but at mealtime let your child decide how much to eat. Forcing kids to eat when they are full teaches them to ignore their own sensations and feelings - a dangerous message for a teen who is reluctant to have sex or drink alcohol but under strong peer pressure to do so.
- Involve your children in meal planning and preparation. Teach them basic nutrition and explain why healthy eating is so important while they are growing and developing.
- Model and encourage sensible eating and an active lifestyle as the best way to maintain a healthy weight. Let teens know that few people look like the super-slim women and buff men shown in magazines and on TV. Avoid criticizing others about their size or weight.
- Know the signs of eating disorders such as cutting food into tiny pieces or always claiming not to be hungry at meals. Obtain professional help if you see those signs – eating disorders are complex and may be difficult to treat.

TO LEARN MORE

For more information on how to encourage your family to eat a healthy, balanced diet, try these sites:

- *Milk Matters* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) at www.nichd.nih.gov/milk.
- *Healthy Eating and Physical Activity across Your Lifespan: Helping Your Child* (NIDDK Weight-Control Information Network) at <http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/child.htm>
- *Eating Disorders* (National Mental Health Information Center, SAMHSA) at www.mentalhealth.org/publications/allpubs/ken98--0047/default.asp
- *Obesity in Children and Teens* (American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists) at www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/obesity_in_children_and_teens

For questions about the survey, please contact Amy Graham, Data Coordinator, at (703) 228-1668 or agraha@arlingtonva.us.

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