

Not-So-Good Nutrition

FINDINGS ON DIET AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

From the March 2010 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 2010 survey of middle and high school students.

WHY WORRY?

Seeming to exist solely on pizza, potato chips, and soda, teenagers are notorious for their unhealthy eating habits.

Poor eating habits are associated with obesity in children as well as 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 14 percent of young people completing the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) reported drinking no milk *at all* during the previous week. Only 18 percent reported drinking the recommended three or more glasses of milk per day. Milk consumption decreased with age – about one in four sixth graders drinks enough milk but only one in ten 12th graders. Boys (20 percent) were more likely than girls (12 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 2850 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 one 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 nearly 10 percent of Arlington youth report consuming *no* fruit in the previous week. And two-thirds report less than one serving per day of fruit juice.

These patterns help explain why only 30 percent of youth report eating the recommended number of daily servings of fruits and vegetables. Consumption of both fruit and fruit juice decline as young people get older, and girls and boys are equally likely to consume too little.

OVERWEIGHT OR AT RISK

Scientists today use body-mass index to determine whether young people are obese or 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 students completing the YRBS are obese and another 12 percent are overweight and at risk for obesity.

Boys were more likely than girls to be obese (25 vs 17 percent). However, girls were slightly more likely to describe themselves as being overweight (27 vs 23 percent) and far more likely to report that they were trying to lose weight (50 vs 33 percent).

UNHEALTHY WEIGHT LOSS

Most young people trying to lose weight used exercise or eating less. However, eleven percent of youth reported using one or more unhealthy methods of weight loss (i.e. 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 (11 percent vs 9 percent.), especially fasting. National data also suggest that girls are smoking cigarettes as a way to lose weight.

CHANGES SINCE 2007

There were virtually no changes among Arlington youth in dietary patterns, perceptions of being overweight or methods to lose weight since the YRBS was last administered in 2007.

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 Information Index* (National Eating Disorders Association) at <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/information-resources/>
- *Obesity in Children and Teens* (American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists) at http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/obesity_in_children_and_teens



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