

Dr. Takahashi's Tips for a Healthier Lifestyle

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1. Everyone in the family should exercise.

Make it your goal to exercise for 60 minutes a day. Start with 30 minutes every day and work up to 60 minutes when you can. The exercise should be strenuous enough so that you are slightly out of breath.

Parents need to keep active in order to stay healthy while they also set an example for their kids. Vigorous walking is a great exercise parents can do on their own, or it can be a family affair. Kids can be involved in sports or, if possible, play outside with other kids. If you're limited to indoor activity, think about using exercise videos, jumping rope, and playing DDR, or "Dance Dance Revolution," a video game that is both fun and great exercise for kids and parents. Also, pedometers are available at Kaiser and can help you judge how much exercise you are actually getting: taking at least 10,000 steps a day is recommended.

2. Limit TV, video, and computer time.

These are the biggest leisure-time activities for kids and have replaced regular exercise. Kids should not watch TV or play more than one hour of video or computer games per day. Those kids who study well and get adequate exercise usually don't have more than one hour a day to spend on these activities. It is okay, however, to videotape some shows during the week so they can be viewed on the weekend.

Kids should not have televisions in their bedrooms. When they do, they end up watching more TV than they should, may see shows that are inappropriate for their age, and may watch TV instead of getting enough sleep. Interestingly, none of my patients who do well in school have televisions in their bedrooms.

3. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables.

The recommendation is to eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, which is not hard to do if you know what a serving size is. Fruits and vegetables have a lot of vitamins and anti-cancer compounds, and the fiber keeps your intestines healthy. The number one cause of abdominal pain in children is constipation, because kids don't eat enough fruits and vegetables. Kids who grow up chronically constipated end up with hemorrhoids as adults—not a pleasant condition!

Choose fruits and vegetables with the most color; they have the most vitamins. Also, try to eat those fruits and vegetables that have high fiber, and leave vegetables raw or at least crunchy whenever possible.

4. Minimize sodas, sport drinks, and juice drinks.

These beverages are not nutritious and provide "empty calories." Because the body doesn't recognize these calories the same way it recognizes food calories, these drinks end up as extra calories that can lead to weight gain. A can of soda is 140 calories, which adds up to 15 pounds per year for one can a day. A juice-drink box or pouch is 100 calories, which, if drunk daily, equals 10 pounds per year. Other downsides to drinking soda are that it's unhealthy for teeth and may result in weaker bones.

With regard to juice, orange juice is probably the most nutritious because of its Vitamin C and carotene content, and those brands supplemented with calcium and Vitamin D are even better. There is even a “low carb” calcium/Vitamin D fortified orange juice made by Minute Maid that has fewer calories (less sugar) but contains all the nutrients. (I don’t recommend the “low carb” Tropicana calcium/Vitamin D fortified orange juice because it has less calcium and Vitamin D.) If your child doesn’t like orange juice, Kern’s nectars are fortified with calcium and vitamin D also.

I consider apple juice the equivalent of sugar water and would not offer it to kids. In fact, juice is no longer recommended during infancy. In older children, the daily amount of juice should be limited to between six and eight ounces unless juice is satisfying part of the daily calcium and Vitamin D requirement.

5. Water should be introduced during infancy.

Plain water should be the beverage of choice at all ages when one is thirsty. There is no need to buy bottled water, an unnecessary expense since tap water is perfectly safe to drink. There are no studies that show bottled water is safer than tap water, although there have been studies to show that bottled water can have impurities.

If you don’t like the flavor of your tap water, buy a filter. It will improve the taste without removing the fluoride that prevents cavities. To transport water, use the newer polycarbonate plastic bottles that can be easily washed and don’t have a plastic aftertaste.

6. Calcium and Vitamin D are critical for bone development.

Milk is traditionally our best source of these nutrients. After one year of age, children should drink whole milk unless there is a weight problem. By two years of age, children should be on 1 percent milk or nonfat milk unless directed otherwise by their physician.

Nonfat milk has all the vitamins and calcium that whole milk has but is much more healthy because of the absence of the fat. A cup of whole milk has the same amount of fat as one and one-half hamburgers, and a cup of reduced fat milk, or 2 percent milk, has the same amount of fat as one hamburger. If a 12-year-old child were to drink the daily recommended four cups of milk in the form of whole milk, that child would be taking in the same amount of fat as is contained in six hamburgers a day, which I hope no one thinks is a good idea. I personally prefer to save my fat calories for other foods. Besides, it is much easier to switch a young child to nonfat milk than an older child.

Other sources of calcium and vitamin D are fortified orange juice and Kern’s nectars, rice milk, soy milk, and calcium and Vitamin D chews, which come in multiple flavors (Viactiv or Flintstone). Of note, calcium is felt to be beneficial with regard to weight control.

7. Avoid eating Trans fats (hydrogenated fats).

The evidence is overwhelming that these types of fats lead to heart disease. Unfortunately, these fats are present in many packaged foods, especially snack foods. A few companies have started using healthier fats in their products. Read the labels and avoid those products that contain “hydrogenated” oils.

8. Eat healthier snack foods.

Fruits and vegetables are great snack foods. One of the mothers in my practice serves her toddlers warmed-up, frozen mixed vegetables. They make a nutritious finger food and come in different colors and shapes. Frozen vegetables in general are more nutritious than fresh vegetables since they are frozen right after they are harvested.

Chips are probably one of the worst snack foods available. They are cooked in Trans fat at high temperatures that produce acrylamide, a chemical that is linked to cancer. Instead, try pretzels, rice crackers, rice cakes, Trans free light popcorn, baked chips or crackers. The zip lock “snack size” baggies are a perfect size if you are putting a snack in your child’s lunch (in addition to fruits/vegetables).

9. Eat more whole grain cereals and breads.

Whole grains are more nutritious, help with weight control because of the increased fiber, are metabolized more slowly so you don’t feel hungry right away, keep your intestines healthy, and may prevent cancer of the intestines. Read the label to look for “whole wheat/whole grain” as the first ingredient. But it is important to watch the total amount of bread, cereal, rice, and pasta eaten daily. Most people eat way too much of this food group. I would recommend five servings or less.

10. Limit the intake of fast foods.

Fast food is expensive and generally unhealthy. Fortunately, there are now some healthier choices available at fast-food restaurants, and you can also bring fruit and raw vegetables with you. French fries should not be eaten often because they are considered as unhealthy as potato chips and also contain acrylamide which may cause cancer.

11. Have your child eat healthy lunches.

Although some schools provide healthy lunches, it would be a good idea to check the menu served at your child’s school. Many schools serve fast food for lunch. In that case, it is more economical and healthier for your child to bring a lunch.

12. Limit chips, candy, cookies, ice cream, donuts, and pastries.

These are “junk foods” that have no nutritious value and are unhealthy. To be honest, I like junk food, but I try to limit the amount I eat. Junk food should not be eaten daily except in small amounts, and it should not be allowed if a child has not eaten his or her fruits and vegetables for the day. “Dessert” should not be routine, and instead fresh fruit can be eaten at the end of dinner. Portion size is especially important with regards to junk food!

13. Don’t overeat.

I was brought up to “finish my plate,” and as a parent, I would often finish my kids’ plates. It is a common practice to eat until we are “stuffed”—a tough habit to break—and we often justify the overeating if we consider the food “healthy.” We need to learn to stop eating when we are no longer hungry.

Restaurants have increased their portion size over the years, and frequent dining at restaurants can lead to a weight problem. It is perfectly okay to bring part of the meal home in a “doggie bag.”

14. Learn to eat correctly from the different food groups.

It's important to eat foods from the different food groups, but in the correct portion sizes. For kids six years and older, a serving of fruit is one medium fruit or a half-cup of cut-up fruit. A serving of vegetables is one-half cup, a serving of rice or pasta is one-half cup, and a serving of meat is the size of a deck of cards. At lunch and dinner, half the food eaten (**one-half of the dinner plate**) should be vegetables or vegetables and fruit, one-quarter of the food should be grains and starches (rice, noodles, potatoes), and one-quarter should be meat or protein.