

## Healthy habits from a young age

To prevent heart disease in adults, we should start encouraging a healthy lifestyle in our children from a young age. We all know how hard it is to stop smoking, lose 5 kilograms or start a new exercise regime. By encouraging an active lifestyle in our children, a love of all healthy foods and distaste for smoking, we make it much easier for them later in life.

## Our children are already at risk

Western culture has many effects on children. Many children are physically inactive because they would rather watch television, play computer games or surf the Internet than play outside or participate in sports. The main causes of being overweight are lack of physical activity and excessive food intake.

## Inactive children are likely to become inactive adults.

Also, children are tempted to eat more fast/junk foods such as hamburgers, chips, pizzas, crisps, chocolates, ice cream, fizzy cold drinks and sweets. These foods are usually high in fat (particularly saturated and trans fats) and sugar, which can lead to both obesity and an increased risk of heart disease.

These foods tend to be low in fibre, micronutrients, and antioxidants, all dietary components that also affect the risk of heart disease and diabetes. Unfortunately, these foods are a big part of socialising for many children.

## Smoking

Non-smokers who breathe in second hand smoke suffer from many of the diseases suffered by active smokers. Research shows that non-smokers living with smokers have an increased risk of heart disease of about 25%. Thus, parents should be careful not to smoke in the presence of their children.

Young people are starting to smoke at younger and younger ages. Research shows that those who start smoking at younger ages find it more difficult to stop or maintain abstinence. In addition, the health risks of smoking are directly related to the age of tobacco initiation and the length of dependence. Parents should educate their children about the dangers of smoking.

## Family history

Children that have a strong family history of heart disease or have conditions such as high cholesterol or diabetes are already at a high risk of developing heart disease. They should take extra care in following a healthy lifestyle to prevent this.

## What to do?

To prevent the development of obesity and diseases such as heart disease and diabetes later in life, children should learn to eat healthily and get into a routine of regular physical activity.

## What type of exercise is recommended?

No specific type of activity is recommended. Children should not only increase their physical activity but also decrease the time they spend on sedentary activities such as watching television and surfing the Internet (less than 2 hours per day).

Children (5 years and older) should be moderately active for at least 30 minutes every day and do a minimum of 30 minutes of vigorous physical activities at least 3-4 days per week.

## Dietary guidelines

- Have at least 3 main meals every day plus 2-3 snacks. Remember, it is important to have breakfast every day!
- Eat a variety of all types of foods.
- Make starchy foods (breakfast cereals, bread, rice, pasta, etc.) the basis of every meal. Choose high fibre foods, i.e. the whole-grain varieties e.g. whole wheat.
- Eat at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables every day. Include at least one dark green leafy vegetable or yellow fruit or vegetable and one Vitamin C rich source (e.g. oranges, tomatoes, broccoli, potatoes, cabbage and guavas).
- Have at least 2-3 servings of milk or milk products every day. Full cream milk should be drunk until age 5 and thereafter low fat milk. An overweight child can change to low fat milk earlier if recommended by a health professional.
- Eat moderate amounts of meat or chicken. Include dairy, eggs, fish, lentils and beans as alternative healthy protein foods rather than red meat on a regular basis. For meat and dairy choices, select lean meats, poultry without skin, and low-fat dairy products.
- Use salt and sugar sparingly.
- Discourage snacking on foods with poor nutrient density e.g. chips, chocolates, sweets etc. Keep a supply of healthier snacks, e.g. fruit and yoghurt.
- Drink fruit juice or water instead of sports drinks or cold drinks (especially caffeine containing drinks such as cola and other energy drinks).

## Healthy lunchbox ideas

Instead of giving your child money, pack a healthy lunchbox that includes, for example, a whole wheat sandwich, a drink (fruit juice or yoghurt) and fruit (fresh or dried) or vegetable sticks.

## Some ideas for toppings on a whole-wheat sandwich, roll or pita:

Salad, tomato sauce or sliced tomato, low fat cheese or cottage cheese, lean meat such as chicken, fish (such as tuna or sardines), cooked ham or turkey, peanut butter, mashed avocado, mashed banana, mashed cooked egg, baked beans, creamed corn, fish paste, jam.

## These toppings can also be used as follows:

Take toast or split a roll or muffin and use one or a combination of the toppings. Grill until heated through and golden brown.

## Healthier snack ideas

Home-made popcorn; plain pretzels; muesli snacks, potato salad, soup, mini pizza with healthy toppings, home-made muffin, crumpets, home-made oat-crunchies, whole-wheat crackers, rice cakes (with toppings such as peanut butter, cheese slices or wedges, sweetcorn), vegetable sticks and yoghurt dip, baby corn, dried fruit, raisins, peanuts, plain boiled or jelly-type sweets, marshmallows, frozen yoghurt.

## Some popular combinations:

- Fruit smoothie: one banana, ½ cup fresh berries (or 1 peach / nectarine), 4 tablespoons fruit juice, 2 ice cubes. Blend until the cubes are crushed. Add 1 cup of yoghurt and blend until smooth OR 1 cup low fat fruit yoghurt, shake up and pour into a glass.
- Ice cream-wiches: put a small scoop of ice cream or frozen yoghurt between two Marie biscuits or frozen waffles. Make a batch of them and freeze them.
- Spread peanut butter on banana slices and put them on a kebab.
- Banana "ice cream": peel bananas, paint with warm honey, roll in fine nuts /dip in yoghurt and roll in crushed breakfast cereal and freeze.

## Ideas for those that do not like fruit and vegetables:

Do not give your child chips, sweets, chocolates, biscuits or cold drinks before supper as they will feel less hungry when arriving at the dinner table.

**Fruit:** fresh fruit, dried fruit, canned fruit, fruit salad with/without yoghurt, make orange boats or banana kayaks, fruit smoothies, wedges or kebabs.

**Vegetables:** fresh or canned vegetables, cut, diced, or made into interesting shapes with biscuit cutters, e.g. make faces on the plates (cucumber eyes and fish finger nose), stir pumpkin into mashed potato, cut vegetables into rice, coleslaw, vegetable stir-fry, vegetable bake, home made burger patties, meat balls or soup.

## How do overweight children lose weight?

The initial goal is to reduce the rate of weight gain with continued growth so that the desired change in weight for height is reached. An integrated approach is recommended involving a healthy diet, regular physical activity, psychological support and behavioural changes.

In cases of excessive weight gain it is essential for the whole family to change their eating habits. Consult a dietician to provide an appropriate eating plan.

## Role of parents in the development of healthy lifestyles

- Teach your child the principles of healthy eating. It will help them to make healthy dietary choices for themselves as they grow up.
- Lead by example. Set a good example by eating healthily, doing regular physical exercise and not smoking.
- Make sure you always have healthy snacks available in your cupboard.
- Start by making small changes and keep your children's preferences in mind.
- Be creative with combinations of foods to make them more acceptable.
- Involve your children in shopping, meal planning and cooking, setting the table and 'playing' restaurant.
- Make meal times a pleasant family occasion.
- A teaspoon of sugar sprinkled onto cereals and fruits, such as oatmeal or grapefruit, can enhance the taste of these healthy foods.
- Encourage physical activity from a young age. Teach children to swim and cycle early in their life.
- Parents have to invest time after work and over weekends to spend time outside with their children, or to encourage children to play sport at school.
- Plan family activities such as hiking, cycling, camping or even just taking a walk or playing a quick game of cricket after work.

**This is one in a series of brochures. For the full series and more heart smart information call the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222 or visit [www.heartfoundation.co.za](http://www.heartfoundation.co.za)**