



Diet and Weight Management in Adolescent Girls

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Received: 19 January 2022 / Accepted: 1 March 2022 / Published online: 30 March 2022
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Abstract

Dietary behaviors established in adolescence usually lead to long-term health consequences. Consuming foods high in fat and sugar on one side and adopting sedentary lifestyle on the other side are responsible for overweight and obesity in adolescent girls which increases the risk of diabetes and hypertension in adult life. Meal convenience is important to many adolescents. In the bargain, they may eat too much of wrong types of food. Teenagers should be taught about the five healthy groups i.e., Grains, proteins, vegetables, fruits and dairy products. Food items with different colors, textures and tastes, both fresh and cooked should be included at every meal and for snacks. The healthiest and the cheapest drink is nothing else but clean water. Adolescent girls need iron-rich food to compensate for monthly period blood loss. Adolescence is not a good time for crash diets as girls will not get enough nutrients to reach their full potential.

Keywords Weight management · Diet · Adolescent girls · Obesity

Introduction

Adolescence is a period of rapid physical growth. Significant height, weight and muscle mass are gained during this period by girls and boys. All these factors lead to increased nutritional demands. Dietary behaviors established in adolescence may contribute to nutrition-related problems that have consequences for long-term health [1]. While obesity is very common in metro cities, poor nutrition is more common among rural areas of India, especially in lower income households of large families with uneducated parents. Particularly among urban residents and rich households, overweight and obesity are emerging problems. This is attributed to changing diet patterns and reduced physical activity levels. Consuming foods high in fat and sugar on one side and adopting a sedentary lifestyle on the other side are responsible for overweight and obesity in adolescent girls which increases the risk of diabetes and hypertension in adult life. In Afghanistan, Bangladesh and India, overweight and obesity in adults have increased two- to five-folds in the last 10 years [1].

Need of the Hour

Body changes taking place during puberty and adolescence have a direct impact on an adolescent girl's nutritional and dietary needs. An increase in appetite demands for healthy foods to meet her growth needs. While parents try to insist on a balanced diet, adolescents are becoming more independent and making food decisions on their own. In reality, girls either eat too little or too much. Food fads, like for junk food and dislike for homemade food, are also very common. Due to long hours at schools/colleges and tuition/hobby classes, they tend to eat more meals outside compared to younger children. Also, there is a lot of peer pressure to indulge into unhealthy meals and snacks. Meal convenience is important to many adolescents and they may be eating too many of the wrong types of food like soft drinks, fast food or processed foods [2].

Eating Healthy

Good eating habits should be inculcated at a young age and this should form a part and parcel of a healthy lifestyle. Teenagers should be taught about the five healthy food groups i.e., grains, proteins, vegetables, fruits and dairy products. Grain foods with a low glycaemic index like whole grain pasta give longer-lasting energy and keep feeling fuller

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for a long time. Key dairy food like milk, cheese and yogurt are good sources of calcium and protein [3]. Eating fruits and vegetables are important as they provide energy, vitamins, antioxidants as well as fiber and water. Above-mentioned food groups contain nutrients that are important for growth and development during puberty. Food items with different colors, textures and tastes, both fresh and cooked should be included at every meal and for snacks. Protein-rich foods are important for growth and muscle development during puberty. Lean meat, fish, chicken and eggs are animal sources of protein-rich foods. Vegetable sources like beans, lentils, chickpeas, tofu and nuts are also rich in proteins. They are essential for growth and development. They also contain omega 3 fatty acids which play an important role in brain development as well as learning. Animal sources of protein-rich foods contain zinc and vitamin B12 too. The healthiest and the cheapest drink is nothing else but clean water. All of us should drink adequate water to avoid dehydration and fatigue. Adolescents should choose snacks from healthy food groups. They include nuts, cheese, low-fat yogurt, fresh fruit and vegetables [3].

Adolescent girls and boys should avoid eating salty/fatty/sugary foods, low-fiber foods and drinks containing caffeine or sugar. Chips, burgers, cakes, pizza, pastries and chocolates are high in salt, saturated fat and sugar. Thus, they are aptly known as junk food or fast food. They are devoid of fibers. Adolescents indulging very often in fast food or junk food are very prone to develop overweight, obesity and type 2 diabetes. Consumption of too many sweet drinks can be the cause of tooth decay. These unhealthy drinks and colas fill the adolescents' appetite making them less hungry for healthy meals.

Useful Food Tips for Adolescent Girls

Nutritional requirements of growing adolescent girls require them to eat 3 regular meals a day with some snacks in between. Skipping meals will lead to the deficiency of vitamins, minerals and carbohydrates, which in turn lead to a lack of energy and difficulty in concentration. Adolescent girls need iron-rich food to compensate for monthly period blood loss. Foods like meat, fish, green leafy vegetables, pulses, lentils, nuts and seeds are good sources of iron. Drinking flavored waters, colas and sports drinks should be avoided as they can lead to weight gain. Eating an adequate amount of food at breakfast improves memory and concentration at school. It is the most important meal of the day and hence should not be skipped. Girls who eat breakfast regularly tend to have a healthier weight than those who skip it. Breakfast provides energy required for studying and playing. Adolescence is not a good time for crash diets as girls will not get enough nutrients to reach their full potential [4].

While studying for exams, etc., adolescent girls and their parents should take special precautions. Eating small, frequent meals, drinking plenty of water are helpful tips. Dehydration may be a cause of tiredness. Multiple cups of coffee/tea/cola or energy drinks result in excessive caffeine ingestion. This can lead to disrupted sleeping patterns, nervousness and difficulty in focusing attention.

Some adolescent girls and young women may become very conscious about their weight and follow unscientific ways to reduce weight. A handful of them may develop an eating disorder leading to extreme disturbances in their eating behavior/related thoughts and feelings. As they have a morbid fear of gaining weight, they try to control their eating habits and restrict intake. They have an overwhelming drive to be thin. Such eating disorders [anorexia nervosa, bulimia] may lead to serious physical and psychological problems. Talking with an experienced counselor is necessary to help change their thoughts, feelings and behaviors related to these eating disorders and to help deal with stressful things happening in their life like relationship problems, school/college issues, etc. [4].

Importance of Exercise

Balanced diet and regular exercise are vital to keep adolescents fit and healthy. Doing exercises regularly improves strength and endurance. It helps build healthy bones and muscles. It controls weight and helps in reducing menstrual problems. Adolescent girls should aim at being physically active for at least 30 min most days of the week. Simply sitting less and moving more can lead to weight reduction. Activities like walking, jogging, yoga, swimming, dancing, playing badminton/tennis, etc., are excellent for losing weight and then maintaining it. Being active physically can boost adolescent girls' moods and decrease depressive symptoms. Thus, a good diet and regular exercise are important for the physical, mental and social well-being of adolescent girls.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author.

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