

Alarming Health Statistics Facing Today's Children

By Zonya Foco, R.D.

As a dietitian and parent, I am always shocked by some of the alarming health statistics related to poor nutrition reported across the nation. And the biggest shocker for me is that many of these statistics affect a younger age group every year — some as young as 7 years old!! For instance, did you know that:

- the American Institute for Cancer Research has determined that while 30% of all cancers are related to smoking, 35% of all cancers are related to our diet?
- heart attacks, strokes and triple bypasses are no longer just for the aged? These life-threatening diseases have now found their way into the lives of 20-year olds.
- “Adult-Onset Diabetes” had to be renamed “Type 2 Diabetes” due to the vast numbers of children developing this lifestyle-induced type of diabetes?
- autopsies from young accident victims found 50% blockages in arteries of children as young as 7 years old?
- as a result of our high-fat, high-sugar, refined-flour diets and our rather sedentary lifestyle, this will be the first generation of children predicted to not outlive their parents?



Creating Healthy Habits in Children

I know it isn't always easy getting kids to eat healthy, so I'd like to help. In addition to parents leading by example, here are a few tips parents, grandparents, teachers and caregivers can use to foster healthy habits in children. Maybe together we can turn some of these alarming statistics around before it's too late.

Make vegetables FUN!

Allow...no encourage them to eat broccoli like dinosaurs! (Stick the stalks in their pile of mashed potatoes and go “Grrrrrr” as they grab with their hands, eating like dinosaurs!) Buy carrots with the green tops so kids can eat like Bugs Bunny and say “What’s up Doc?” Try serving fresh leaves of baby spinach overhead, holding the leaves in your outstretched hand as if they are leaves dangling from trees. Suggest to your children that they are a giraffe and see how far they can stretch their necks out to eat the leaves from the tree. (Warning: You will be amazed at how hungry your little “giraffe” can be, so make sure you have lots of fresh spinach.)

Get sneaky

Turn pinto beans into dip by pureeing them with salsa in the blender. Use the food processor to whirl fresh or frozen spinach, broccoli, peppers or carrots into spaghetti sauce. Camouflaged into tiny little pieces means they won't suspect a thing! Or stir-fry veggies in sweet-and-sour sauce, dip in light dressing or top them with melted, reduced-fat cheese.

Make “fruit and vegetable” desserts

Carrot cake, pumpkin muffins, blueberry buckle, cakes and cookies are all great ways to incorporate fruits and vegetables. Simply use reduced-fat and low-sugar recipes with whole-grain flour.

Slash the sugar

A 12-ounce can of regular soda pop contains 40 grams of sugar which is the same as 10 teaspoons!!! Have your kids choose soda OR ice cream OR a cookie for their sweet treat of the day, but NOT all three. Also save their favorite high-sugar cereals to be used sparingly as special “toppers” on healthier whole-grain, high-fiber cereals.

Snack on ready-to-eat vegetables

Always keep a bowl or plate of ready-to-eat-vegetables in the fridge for snacking. When kids ask for a snack before dinner, place the bowl on the table and just say, “You can eat whatever is on the table.” They may refuse at first, but the chances of their eating vegetables are best when kids are the HUNGRIEST and veggies are AVAILABLE.



Create a “5-a-day” strategy

Present one fruit and/or vegetable at EVERY meal and EVERY snack.

Limit the amount of “bad” and “ugly” fats

Certainly children need fat in their diet, but not the “bad” saturated fats or the “ugly” trans fats. Too much saturated fat from meats and dairy, and trans fat from foods containing partially hydrogenated fats clog arteries, cause weight gain, increase cancer risks and cause poor physical performance in sports and play.

- Start serving low-fat milk (1% or less), reduced-fat cheeses and low-fat ice cream
- Select lean cuts of meats and make sure the portion sizes don’t get out of control even for children
- Use olive and canola oil instead of butter or margarine – even for your grilled cheese sandwiches
- Start walking away from the ever-present fast-food French fries and commercial nachos covered in “plastic” cheese.

Give foods a fun and tasty name

Kids would much rather eat dessert than a salad, so change your Crunchy Apple Salad to Crunchy Apple Dessert. Also get creative with names, like Pizzucchini- (zucchini casserole that smells and tastes like pizza).

Get them involved

Include your kids in the shopping of this week’s fruits and vegetables. Ask them to pick one new vegetable or fruit that the family has never tried before. Have them help prepare healthy snacks and even a complete meal. (Don’t forget to take their photo holding the dish they’ve made!) Watch their self esteem skyrocket along with these invaluable new life skills. Let them name their creations and they’ll take ownership and pride as well as feeling like they’ve had choices.



“Zonya — Here’s a photo of the Surprise Pumpkin Pie I made by myself last week. It’s gone now!! I look forward to making more of your recipes.”
Alex Mitchell, 10 years old
Grinnell, IA

Explain WHY we can't eat candy all the time

I suggest describing healthy foods as "GROW FOODS" and unhealthy foods as "not GROW FOODS." Then they decide themselves which ones they want to eat the most of, without calling certain foods "good" or "bad."

Disband the "Clean Plate Club"

Training children to eat past "no longer hungry" promotes a lifetime of overeating and not listening to what our body truly needs. Teach yourself and your children to listen to their GUT FEELINGS so it becomes a natural process to stop eating when no longer hungry.

- Instead of saying, "clean your plate," say, "when your stomach tells you you've had enough, you can be excused." Then cover unused portions and refrigerate for the next meal or snack.
- Remember that when serving dessert, everyone should save room for this additional intake instead of cleaning your plate so you can have dessert.
- When your child eats a big meal, avoid the temptation to say, "good boy" or "good girl." Instead stay focused on their gut feelings and say, "Wow, you were hungry, weren't you?"
- Teach children to say "NO!" to super-sizing!

Remember that persistence pays

Kids may balk at broccoli, spinach, beans or even fruit at first, but studies have shown that children and adults alike generally accept a new food by the eleventh try.

