



Updates on Healthy Eating and Walkers

by Susan Aronson, MD

Promoting Healthy Eating

The USDA reports that only 2% of children are actually eating according to the Food Guide Pyramid and 16% don't meet any of the recommendations. Fewer than half eat the recommended number of grain servings and nearly half of school children eat less than one fruit serving a day. More than 75% eat too much saturated fat. Yet, early childhood is the time to lay the foundation of lifetime eating patterns.

Even when children bring their food from home, child care programs can help parents make healthy choices for their children's lunches. By sending home suggestions for nutritious meals and snacks that are safe to pack and carry in lunch boxes, caregivers can help busy parents plan ahead. The task begins with shopping for healthy ingredients, with a preference for those that do not require refrigeration. If foods that come from home need refrigeration, using frozen coolers in the box helps keep such foods at the right temperature.

While frozen juice works as a cooler, juice is not as good a drink for kids as milk. If children drink juice with meals, they should have milk for snack and water whenever they are thirsty.

Two new publications highlight the areas where children should improve their eating habits: *Healthy People 2010* and the report of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee on *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2000*.

Childhood obesity is at epidemic proportions. Being overweight is unhealthy for children and adults. Many overweight young children become overweight adults. What children observe and do with adults sets lifetime expectations for activity and eating.

Obesity raises the risk of illness in later childhood and in adult life. The list of diseases associated with obesity includes high blood pressure; high cholesterol; diabetes; heart disease and stroke; breast, prostate, and colon cancers; and others. You are never too young or too old to learn to consume the foods and portion sizes on the Food Guide Pyramid and schedule a period of physical activity every day.

Walkers

We've known for a while that infant walkers are dangerous toys because they move kids around too fast and to areas where there are hazards, such as stairs. Upright position brings children close enough to objects to pull things down on themselves. Still, being upright before they can sit or stand well by themselves seems to make many children happy. To gain this benefit without dangerous

mobility, manufacturers have made stationary walkers instead of the more dangerous mobile type.

Now there is new evidence that even these stationary devices may be a problem by delaying motor development. In one small study, children who used walkers sat, crawled, and walked later than those who did not use walkers. The effects seemed to last for as long as ten months after the initial use of a walker.

Children need the exercise involved in moving themselves around and pulling up on objects. They need the adult attention and affection that comes from being held for upright play. Although an occasional use of an infant seat that has a tray for toys may encourage fine motor play, it's time for infant walkers to disappear from child care.

References

Healthy people 2010: Understanding and improving health (Conference edition). Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Health and Human Services or www.health.gov/healthypeople.

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