

How to Talk to Teens About Food

Food is part of everyday life. Everyone has a unique history with food which impacts how one thinks, talks, and enjoys food.

You play an important role in shaping a teen's relationship with food. Words and actions influence growth, social wellbeing, and mental health.

Teens who have a positive relationship with food:

- Eat a variety of food without fear, shame, or guilt.
- Enjoy eating with others.
- Listen to their body and trust it to know what and how much to eat.
- Know that food is one part of life. It does not need all their attention.



Use Neutral Language

- Avoid labeling food as *good* or *bad*, or using words like *clean eating* or *junk food*. Instead, call food by its name. A cookie is a cookie, not a *treat* or *unhealthy food*.
- Describe the smell, flavour, colour, or texture of food. A *vegetable stir fry* is *fresh, spicy, or crunchy*.
- Redirect conversations that connect food to weight or the way you look. Instead, talk about how a variety of food helps bodies and minds feel good. Restricting food and dieting is not safe for teens.

Explore and Enjoy a Variety of Foods

- Welcome all types of food at home, unless there are allergies or cultural food restrictions.
- Share food traditions and celebrations. Make recipes with your teen passed down by family or friends, or discover new ones.
- Encourage teens to try new food and eating experiences. Embrace their curiosity! Teach them to buy, prepare, and sample food that is new to them.
- Learn together about how food connects to the land and traditional ways to grow, harvest, fish, hunt, and prepare food.



Understand Food and Feeding Roles

- **Adults** decide what food to offer, and when and where to eat it.
- **Kids and teens** decide how much and if they will eat the food offered.

As teens grow, build their skills and confidence to take on adult roles. Include them in grocery shopping and menu planning. Put them in charge of packing school lunches or making a family dinner. Have fun exploring their ideas without judgment.

Support Positive Mealtimes

Make time to eat meals together. Create a positive eating experience:

- Enjoy time together and keep the conversation positive. Avoid commenting on teens' food choices and the amount they are eating.
- Trust teens when they say or signal that they are hungry or full.
- Turn off screens to talk, connect, and relax together.
- Encourage eating regular meals and snacks throughout the day.



Set an Example

How you talk about food, eating, and bodies can impact teens. Reflect on personal beliefs and biases. Consider how these affect feelings about food and bodies.

Model a healthy relationship with food and body:

- Try to eat a variety of foods that you like and listen to your body's hunger and fullness cues when you can.
- Take care of your body the way it is right now, without trying to change it. Eat regularly, move in ways you enjoy, and make time for sleep. Help your teen to do the same.
- Do not restrict foods or talk about dieting in front of teens.

Respect ALL Bodies!

Bodies come in all shapes and sizes, and should be respected, accepted, and celebrated.

- Avoid commenting or joking about body sizes or appearances. Speak up about admirable qualities in teens and others, like kindness, strength, generosity, and courage. Encourage teens to do the same.
- Teach teens to be critical of the information they see in the media related to food, dieting and bodies. There is no "ideal" body and all bodies are worthy.

Have nutrition questions?

Dial 811 and ask to speak to a Registered Dietitian for free or visit healthconnectontario.health.gov.on.ca to start an online chat.

Concerned about your teen's eating or body image?

Visit nedic.ca to access live chat support, or call 1-866-NEDIC-20.