

tool kit for teen care

Weight and Adolescent Females



How much should adolescent females weigh?

- One third of high-school females think they are overweight. In reality, only a small proportion of these teens are overweight.
- Television programs and magazine covers are filled with thin women, which often may lead to wrong ideas about what is a healthy body weight.
- Body mass index (BMI) can be used to see if a person's weight is healthy. It is computed as weight (in pounds) divided by height squared (in inches) multiplied by 700. To determine if there is a weight problem, calculate body mass index (BMI), compare it to the growth charts found at the web site of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/major/nhanes/growthcharts/set3/chart%2016.PDF), and consult a health professional.

What is a healthy diet?

- A variety of foods, such as vegetables, fruit, and milk, are critical to the intake of recommended amounts of vitamins and trace minerals. Eating just one type of food from a food group often will result in poor nutrition. Good diets are low in fats and moderate in sugars and salt. Vitamin pills cannot replace a good diet.
- A balanced diet for teens is made up of 3–4 servings of dairy products, 2–3 servings of meat products, 3–5 servings of vegetables, 2–4 servings of fruits, and 6–11 servings of grains. A serving is not very big. For example, one serving of meat is the size of a deck of cards.
- Good eating habits and regular exercise set the most critical foundations for a lifetime of general good health. Poor eating habits may lead to increased health risks, including diabetes, some cancers, osteoporosis, complications with pregnancies, and heart disease.

What are some special nutritional concerns in American teens?

- Nutritional experts have recommended how much of specific nutrients should be consumed. These values vary by age. Some are higher for pregnant teens.

Iron and Calcium

- Iron deficiency is alarmingly common in adolescent females after menstruation begins. Increased intake of meats, dried beans, and iron-fortified cereals can reduce this problem.
- Calcium intake also is often low. The recommended intake of calcium for adolescents is 1,300 mg a day, which can be consumed by eating 3–4 dairy servings each day.

Vegetarian Diets

- Vegetarian diets have many potential benefits, including that they are usually low in fat and high in bulk.
- Careful planning is needed to avoid protein and vitamin deficiencies in teen girls who are vegetarians.
- A nutritionist often is a good resource for helping families plan and provide balanced vegetarian menus for teens who choose a vegetarian diet.

Folate

- Lack of folate can be a big problem for adolescents.
- Teens can increase their intake by eating green leafy vegetables.

Caloric intake

- The number of calories required to maintain weight in teens depends on age, height, weight, and especially exercise.
- A sedentary (not very active) teen could require fewer calories whereas an active teen could require substantially more calories (see Table 1).

Table 1. Approximate calories for a teen female in United States to maintain weight by activity level.

Activity level	Approximate calories/day to maintain weight
Sedentary (not active)	1,800
Moderately active	2,000
Active	2,300





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What should a teen do if she is overweight and wants to lose weight?

- Two basic approaches to weight loss are eating less and exercising more. Doing both is best.
- Although most adolescent females rely on dieting to lose weight, studies have often shown that regular exercise is probably the best initial approach and more likely to result in long-term weight loss. Regular exercise is more important than hard exercise.
- The first priority should be to exercise regularly and then work to increase the length of time and intensity of exercise.
- Approximately 3–4 sessions each week of low-intensity activity for 30–60 minutes duration is a reasonable initial goal.
- Programs that provide a variety of athletic options are often the most likely to be successful. For example, a combination of biking, walking, exercise classes, tennis, and swimming is interesting, challenging, and fun.
- A low-calorie diet can be added to exercise as part of a weight loss program.
- Diets should never go below 1,200 calories, the minimum to allow for good nutritional intake.
- Many young women use unbalanced, extreme, or fad diets, which are not likely to result in long-term weight maintenance. Most women who have lost weight on these diets gain it back quickly.
- It is important to note that low fat does not always mean fewer calories.
- Dietary pills and products should not be used. They often are unsuccessful.
- Successful dietary strategies for long-term weight loss or maintenance often are small dietary changes or cutbacks. For example, one less small side of french fries per week for 1 year without any other dietary or exercise changes would result in a weight loss of approximately 5 pounds.
- Understanding and applying good nutrition to a weight loss program that is realistic and likely to succeed takes knowledge and planning. Often the advice of a nutritionist is invaluable. If another person (such as a parent) prepares the teen's diet, it often is helpful for that person to see the nutritionist also.

- It is important to establish a lifelong pattern of healthy eating and exercise. Doing so has been shown to help overweight individuals lose and maintain their weight.

What is an eating disorder?

- Teens who binge or purge (eat to excess and vomit, take laxatives, or exercise excessively) may be of high, normal, or low body weight. Many meet the technical definition of bulimia. All should seek professional help.
- Using chemical substances to induce vomiting is dangerous and can cause direct damage to the heart or lead to death due to chemical imbalances.
- Anorexia, the failure to eat to maintain weight at minimal levels, has potentially serious medical complications, such as osteoporosis (weak bones) and death.
- Anorexic patients often have an abnormal perception that they are "fat" even though their body weight is below normal. Individuals with this disorder need urgent professional help.
- Parents should not worry about making their children anorexic if they limit the amount of sweets they are allowed to eat. If they have any concerns about their child's eating habits, they should talk with their health care practitioner.
- To help determine if a person has or is likely to develop an eating disorder, check out the web site of the Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc (www.anred.com/slf_tst.html).

For More Information

We have provided information on the following organizations and web sites because they have information that may be of interest to our readers. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists does not necessarily endorse the views expressed or the facts presented by these organizations or on these web sites. Further, ACOG does not endorse any commercial products that may be advertised or available from these organizations or on these web sites.

American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance
1900 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191-1599
Telephone: 800-213-7193
www.aahperd.org

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
409 12th Street SW
PO Box 96920
Washington, DC 20090-6290
Telephone: (202) 863-2497
Fax: (202) 484-3917
www.acog.org

American College of Sports Medicine
401 West Michigan Street
Indianapolis, IN 46202-3233
Telephone: (317) 637-9200
www.acsm.org

American Dietetic Association
216 West Jackson Boulevard
Chicago, IL 60606-6995
Telephone: (312) 899-0040
www.eatright.org

American Heart Association
7272 Greenville Avenue
Dallas, TX 75231-4596
Telephone: 800-242-8721
www.americanheart.org

Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc.
www.anred.com

AWARE Foundation
1015 Chestnut Street, Suite 1225
Philadelphia, PA 19107-4302
Telephone: (215) 955-9847
www.awarefoundation.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Division of Adolescent and School Health
4770 Buford Highway, NE, MS K-32
Atlanta, GA 30341-3724
Telephone: 888-CDC-4NRG
www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash

National Association for Health & Fitness
The Network of State and Governor's Councils
401 West Michigan Street
Indianapolis, IN 46202-3233
Telephone: (317) 955-0957
www.physicalfitness.org

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
PO Box 30105
Bethesda, MD 20824-0105
Telephone: (301) 251-1222
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/index.htm

U.S. Surgeon General
www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/fact_adolescents.htm