

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Getting Teens to Eat Fruits and Vegetables Makes a Difference and Brain Health Matters

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **This week we are focusing on the brain health protective factor of nutrition and the implications of eating the right foods to teens brain health and performance.***

If there is a teenager in the house we can usually be assured of two things: what they are eating is likely not something healthy. We all worry about what our kids are eating. When children are younger, we have more control over how many fruits and vegetables are in their diet. But as children get older and busier, we lose some of that influence; they are getting their own snacks, often their own meals, and in many cases, they are foregoing nutrition for convenience.

Even before pandemic pounds became an issue, our teens were not eating enough fruit and vegetables, according to a [report](#) released in January by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Minimum daily recommendations from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for 14- to 18-year-olds is 1.5 cups of fruit and 2.5 cups of vegetables for females and 2 cups of fruit and 3 cups of vegetables for males. The CDC reported that nationally, only 7.1 percent of teenagers met the USDA intake recommendations for fruits and 2 percent met the recommendation for vegetables.

What your teen eats — and doesn't eat — can influence their brain health and performance and impact their risk for brain illness. Diets high in saturated fat, refined carbohydrates, and processed food products (common among teenagers) combined with the everyday stress of being a teenager, can increase the risk for brain illness, including depression and anxiety disorders. Eating a brain healthy diet can help improve their mood, energy level, performance in school, brain and physical health, and overall physical fitness and well-being.

So, what can you do to help your kids eat right? The [Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health](#) created the Kid's Healthy Eating Plate as a [visual guide](#) for the food choices and as a way to inspire the selection of healthy meals and snacks.



The main message of the Healthy Eating Plate is to focus on diet quality. Eating a variety of foods keeps meals interesting and flavorful. It recommends focusing on plenty of fruits and vegetables and steering away from processed foods, sugary drinks, and saturated fat.

So be creative when it comes to encouraging your teen to eat the right foods. Keep plenty of ready-to-eat fruit and vegetable snacks on hand, include fruits and veggies in family meals. This is also a good time to get

your teen involved in meal planning, preparation, presentation, and teaching them about the importance of healthy eating.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO BOOST YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

If you are looking for ways to get more fruits and vegetables into your teen's diet, here are some suggestions from the BHI and the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

- **Make organic fruits and vegetables easily available.** Keep fruit washed, cut up, and in plain sight in the refrigerator and your kids are more likely to grab it as a snack.
- **Serve more salads.** Buy prewashed, organic greens and pre-mixed salad so it's easy to prepare. Teach your teen about using an appropriate amount of healthy salad dressing and how to order dressing "on the side" when eating out. Better yet, use healthy oil and lemon or lime to enhance the flavor of the salad.
- **Go vegetarian.** Meatless Mondays are a thing, and many family favorites have a vegetarian alternative. Look for recipes for spaghetti, lasagna, chili, or other foods that use vegetables instead of meat.
- **Aim for one a day.** To make sure your teen is getting enough vitamin A and vitamin C, serve at least one vitamin A-rich leafy green or yellow vegetable, such as kale, spinach, broccoli, winter squash, greens, or carrots, and one fruit or vegetable high in vitamin C, such as oranges, grapefruit, strawberries, melon, tomato, and broccoli, each day.
- **Make fruits or vegetables part of every meal or snack.** Put fruit on cereal, add a piece of fruit to lunch, use vegetables and a brain healthy dip for an after-school snack, or add a vegetable or two to the family dinner.
- **Don't forget fish.** In addition to more fruits and vegetables, your teen probably isn't eating enough fish. Fish is packed with nutrients that support healthy brain development and daily performance. Bland isn't always better when it comes to fish so spice it up and be creative. Most teens love tacos so try adding fish tacos to your menu.
- **Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate.** Guidelines from the Institute of Medicine recommends kids between the ages of 14 and 18 should be drinking 64 to 88 ounces, 8 to 11 cups, of fluid every day, and even more if they are involved in sports. Your teen should drink mainly water and low-fat or fat-free milk. Sugary soda and fruit juices may be tasty, but they are full of empty, and often unhealthy, calories.

- **Be a role model.** Nothing shows the importance of eating fruits and vegetables than eating them yourself.
- **BE BRAIN HEALTHY** and **adopt a lifestyle** for you and your family that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses and language that promote:
 - Stress resilience
 - Nutrition
 - Physical activity
 - Sleep
 - Social connection
 - Emotional wellbeing
 - Meaning and Purpose
 - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
 - Engaging with nature
 - General health
 - Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the **Be Brain Healthy** movement, **because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference**. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).