

Countdown to back to school: get healthy



With the lazy days of summer, it's easy to let good eating habits and sleep schedules slide. But getting the right nutrition and the right amount of sleep are both important for your student.

What should my child eat?

Although school lunch programs and vending machines on campus have taken a lot of heat for contributing to a nationwide epidemic of childhood obesity, schools are not the only ones to blame. In a 2007 *American Journal of Public Health* study, the data showed that the body mass index of kindergartners and first-graders increased two to three times as fast in summer as during the school year. This may be because students are more likely to have structured days and regular meals during the school year, as well as regular exercise. They may be watching less TV during the school year too.

This means parents need to provide structure for their kids during the summer, with regular mealtimes and healthy snacks, and be aware of what their kids are eating at summer programs and at home.

Stock up on fruits and vegetables.

Health experts at the Harvard School of Public Health recommend eating nine servings (about 4 ½ cups) of fruits and vegetables a day. That means including fruits and vegetables at every meal — and in between too! Fruit slices and carrot and celery sticks make good snacks and are easy to take along in the car or on summer outings. The health benefits of eating lots of fruits and vegetables include lower blood pressure and

reduced risk of heart disease, stroke, and possibly some cancers.

Stick with whole grains and low-fat proteins.

Make sure your child is in the habit of eating a good breakfast well before the start of school. Look for breakfast cereals that have little to no sugar and contain whole grains such as oats, bran, and cornmeal. Choose whole-wheat bread for sandwiches and whole-wheat pasta for your next spaghetti meal. These healthy eating habits will help prevent heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

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Cut down on saturated fats and sugar.

Lemonade, juice, and soda are all big sources of sugar and empty calories. It's tempting during the summer to reach for these to quench your child's thirst. In preparation for back to school, switch to water and low-fat or nonfat milk. Cut back on other summer treats like ice cream and French fries too. Good alternatives are [easy-to-make fruit pops](#), [smoothies](#), and [these healthy snacks](#).

Check out the Harvard School of Public Health's [Nutrition Source site](#) for more healthy eating ideas.

How much sleep does my child need?

Children ages 5 to 12 need 10 to 11 hours of sleep, and teens need nine hours, according to the [National Sleep Foundation](#).

Sleep deprivation can affect cognitive skills and academic achievement. A continuing lack of sleep is linked to serious health problems including diabetes, obesity, heart disease, depression, and a shortened life span. Falling into a relaxed bedtime schedule during the summer is easy, so it's a good idea to gradually change your routine well before school starts. To avoid bedtime battles as the first day of school approaches, try moving bedtime earlier by 10 or 15 minutes each night, beginning two to three weeks before school starts. Encourage your child to get up earlier too.

“Most important in changing the sleep schedule is to get your child up on time. You can be less concerned about getting them to bed on time, as research shows getting them up is key to making the shift,” says Laurence Steinberg, professor of psychology at Temple University and the author of *You and Your Adolescent* and *The 10 Basic Principles of Good Parenting*.

To learn more about the importance of sleep for school success, check out “[Sleep: The Secret Weapon for School Success.](#)”