

Nutrition

Q & A with Dr. Alison Hoppin

Dr. Hoppin: Hi, I'm Dr. Alison Hoppin, and I'm a specialist in pediatric gastroenterology and nutrition at Mass General Hospital. I'm here to talk today about healthy eating for children.

Q : Why is it so important for my kids to eat healthy?

Dr. Hoppin: Healthy eating is important for children for many different reasons. One reason is that it helps them to feel better now and to learn better, to play better, and to enjoy physical activity and sports better as well. Equally important, it's important for their long-term health. If children learn to eat healthy as a child, then they'll eat healthy as an adult, and this helps to prevent a lot of medical problems that we know are related to nutrition and good health. That includes diabetes and heart disease and actually several forms of cancer as well. Childhood is when one learns healthy eating habits, from parents in most cases, so now is a really good time to help your children learn to be healthy eaters, which is a gradual process, so that they will enjoy being healthy eaters as adults.

Q : I've heard breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Is that really true?

Dr. Hoppin: Breakfast is an important meal for children and for adults. It's because it helps you wake up, it helps you learn better, it helps you do better at physical activity, and equally important, it helps you make better choices in your food later in the day. If you skip breakfast, then your body gets hungry even if you're not feeling that hunger signal in your brain, and you're less likely to make healthy choices at lunch or in the afternoon.

Q : My kids really don't like eating vegetables. What can I do?

Dr. Hoppin: Many children are slow to learn to like vegetables, and many parents find this very frustrating, and sometimes you're tempted to just give up. But the most important thing you can do is be very patient and very persistent about this. Make sure you buy plenty of vegetables for the house, eat a lot of those yourself, because setting a good example is the most important thing that you can do, and keep offering those same vegetables to the child. Ask them to try a taste each time, even if they've refused it many times before. Very slowly,

usually over the course of years, they will start to expand the foods that they're willing to eat and they'll actually start to really like some of these as well. Another good thing you can try to do is to have the children help you cook. At first, this may actually slow you down a little bit, as you might imagine, but it does keep the kids entertained and it's a great time to help the kids learn about healthy foods and get them interested in healthy foods.

Q : Should we completely avoid fast food?

Dr. Hoppin: It is possible to eat healthy at a fast food restaurant, but you need to move very carefully and plan ahead. For example, some fast food restaurants now post some nutrition information on their menu, and this is very helpful in order to allow you to find the lighter things in the menu. Some of them you can guess at as well. For example, a wrap usually is going to be lighter than some of the sandwiches or the hamburgers, for example. Foods that are fried are usually not so light and not very healthy for you, and they tend to have a lot of salt in them as well. Be a little bit careful of the wraps and the salads because they can come with a very rich dressing of some sort as well. If you know where you're going and plan ahead, you can look it up on the Internet ahead of time so that you know what the nutrition information is before you walk into the restaurant.

Q : Should I ban sweets, or are sweets okay sometimes?

Dr. Hoppin: Any food is okay once in a while, and that includes sweets. For example, if a child is going to a birthday party or on Halloween, let them have some sweets. You can keep it to a minimum by making sure that there aren't a lot of sweets in the house, that this isn't something that happens all the time or every day of the week. If you encourage them to develop a healthy attitude about food, then in the long run, they're going to be better able to make healthy decisions for themselves.

Q : There's so many fad diets out there. How do I know what's really healthy and what's not?

Dr. Hoppin: Be a little bit careful of the various popular diets that are out there. Some of them are reasonably healthy, but any time a diet tries to narrow your food choices in a very big way, you're limiting the breadth of your diet, and it's probably not

something that's going to be helpful to you in the long run. The most healthy diets are diets that you can keep up forever that are well-balanced, that have plenty of the healthy types of foods—a large part of that is vegetables and fruits and then some of the healthy lean proteins—and relatively few of the unhealthy foods. Diets that are imbalanced are not going to be helpful to you in the long run, and if they help someone who needs to lose weight lose weight, usually it's just a temporary effect.

Q : How do I know if my daughter has a weight problem?

Dr. Hoppin: Parents often ask me, "What is a healthy weight for my child?" The healthiest weight is going to be a weight that is similar to your height percentiles. So for example, if your child's weight is much higher in percentiles than the height percentile, then the child may have a weight problem. The best thing to do is to look at the growth charts with your doctor to look at the trends and to decide whether this is a natural tendency for the child or whether there's something that you should do in order to improve their weight patterns over time. Keep a positive attitude for the child. Try to find the things that the child enjoys in lifestyle. If you think the child should get more exercise, find some fun ways of having the child get more exercise. If you want to introduce the child to healthier foods, work on that together and make it fun for them.

Q : Do you have any tips to promote healthy eating?

Dr. Hoppin: Eating together as a family is one of the best things that you can do for your children. It really is important to help teach them healthy eating. For example, kids learn most of their eating habits at the dinner table with their family. Also, they're learning many other things at the table with you. They're learning your family values, they're learning how to have a conversation with adults, and they're learning new vocabulary, which helps them in school in the long run. I know that it's sometimes hard to have dinner as a family every night of the week, especially if your work schedules don't allow that, but if you can try to do it at least twice a week, that will be very helpful for your children.

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