

Dangers of Dieting for Youth

Diets are an ever-popular, but rarely successful, path to a healthy weight. While most adults can lose 5-10% of their starting weight on almost any diet, they usually regain that weight (and often more) over the next few years. Restrictive diets can develop into serious problems for children and teens. Parents, teachers, coaches, and other important adults can help young people develop healthy behaviors without the dangers of diets.

What we know

While extreme, fad diets have many downsides for adults, the implications for children and adolescents can be more serious. Here's why pediatric experts say "no" to dieting for youth.

Diets can limit the nutrients kids need for growth and development: Many popular diets limit one or more food groups, like carbohydrates from grains and fruit. This means that kids do not get the nutrients they need, like fiber, for optimal health.

Diets can make kids feel like failures: Most diets over-promise results, both in terms of weight loss and in how much better life will be. When children fail to reach weight goals and their lives are still the same, they end up feeling even worse than before.

Diets can develop into eating disorders: Pediatricians and dietitians caution that seemingly innocent diets can turn into serious eating disorders in vulnerable children, especially high-achieving and depressed adolescents.

What you can do

Eliminate the "D" word from your vocabulary.

- Children are always watching what you say and what you do. So, do not talk about diets or behave as if you are constantly dieting.
- Actively work to discourage dangerous dieting. For practical, positive tips, read www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/uploads/file/information-resources/50-Ways-to-Lose-the-3Ds.pdf.

Help children listen to internal signals of hunger and satiety.

- The most effective, intuitive way for children to eat is to listen to their own natural, internal signals of hunger and satiety (also called fullness or satisfaction).
- Help children listen to these internal cues with simple, age-appropriate questions: *Does your stomach feel hungry? Is your tummy still hungry? Are you feeling full now?*

Make nutrient-rich food choices tasty and easy.

- Keep a variety of delicious, nutritious foods and beverages readily available and within children's reach on your counters, cupboards, and refrigerator.
- Nudge children toward healthful options by making them appealing and easy. Cut fruit into pieces or take baby carrots out of the bag and put them into a bowl.