

## Teen Health



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**The teenage years are often when it's most difficult to achieve and maintain optimal health, both physical and mental.** Teens still have increased nutritional needs due to growth and maturation, and yet, due to predominantly social factors, they are less likely to meet their needs. This age span is a challenge, as adolescents are neither children whose actions and dietary intake can be controlled or impacted on by their parents, nor adults who are likely to have the knowledge and experience to make appropriate decisions. To positively impact on teenagers' lifestyle decisions, parents need to start early, constantly encouraging both physical activity and healthful diet choices.

For teenagers, who are heavily influenced by social atmosphere, martial arts is a perfect "athletic" choice. Participants engage in physical activity in a social and yet supportive "family" atmosphere. And according to psychological studies, the mental health of this age group is dramatically affected by physical activity. So by participating in a martial arts program, teens can obtain all the physical benefits of exercise (improved caloric balance, heart and circulatory health, flexibility, balance, etc.) along with this important psychological benefit. And with martial arts, teens are more likely to "stick with it," as there is a commitment to and investment in the program.

In terms of diet, the most difficult nutrients for this age group to consume appear to be those from dairy products. Needs for calcium remain high for teens, but this age group tends to reduce their liquid milk intake. If there is one food that you should encourage your teen to consume, it is milk. Skim milk, even when flavored, is an excellent source of both calcium and vitamin D, not to mention protein. And studies show that with higher dairy intake, even adults do not have higher overall intakes of fat or cholesterol. So for a nutritionally sound diet, encourage milk and dairy product consumption, and from a very young age.

Because you may not be present for most of your teen's meals and snacks, be sure to always offer a nutritious meal in the evening. And remember that being nutritionally balanced doesn't have to mean a laborious meal. In addition, keep an ample stock of healthful snack choices available in your home to encourage healthy between-meal snacks.

Don't forget that you are your child's most important role model. If you are regularly physically active and make healthful food choices for yourself and your family, your child or teen is more likely to mimic these behaviors, and in fact, see them as "the usual."