

What is healthy eating anyways?

With so many mixed messages in the news and social media, it is hard to know what it means to eat “healthy.” For adolescents, defining “healthy eating” is even more complicated by the fact that, for most teens, **weight gain** between early and late adolescence is not only normal, **but expected.**

Here at the Columbia Center for Eating Disorders, we consider the following behaviors as part of healthy eating for teens:

- ✓ Eating regular meals and snacks (for example, 3 meals and 2-3 snacks daily).
- ✓ Eating a wide variety of foods from all the food groups.
- ✓ Exercising for fun and to take care of oneself.
- ✓ **Not** spending too much time outside of meals thinking about food and eating.
- ✓ For teens who are working on changing weight due to health concerns, doing so with a doctor or dietician familiar with weight management in adolescents.

Where do you fall on [Eating Behavior Spectrum?](#)

Eating disorder myths and facts:

- ✓ **Myth:** Only females can develop eating disorders.
Fact: Eating disorders affect 1-4% of young **women** and about .1-.4% of young **men**.
- ✓ **Myth:** Eating disorders are a phase and are not serious.
- ✓ **Fact:** Eating disorders are associated with **significant** psychological **distress** and **physical risk**. They often require medical and mental health treatment.
- ✓ **Myth:** Eating disorders are caused by social pressure to be thin and the media.
- ✓ **Fact:** Eating disorders are **brain-based illnesses**. We don't know exactly what causes eating disorders, but there are likely many contributing factors, involving a combination of biological factors (such as genetics or changes that come with puberty) and environmental factors (such as life transitions to a new school or town, friend groups, etc. Both biological and environmental factors are probably involved in protecting other individuals from developing eating disorders.
- ✓ **Myth:** Everyone binge eats.
- ✓ **Fact:** Most people overeat from time to time, like on Thanksgiving. Binge eating is eating an unusually large amount of food (that most people would agree is large for the situation) while feeling that one **cannot stop eating or control** what or how much one is eating. It is often accompanied by eating when **not hungry or until uncomfortably full**, eating alone due to feeling embarrassed, and followed by any of negative emotions.

Warning signs of eating disorders

Eating disorder prevention tips

Behavior

Dieting/chaotic food intake
Pretends to eat ('already eaten' or 'not hungry')

Compulsive exercise
Frequent trips to the bathroom after eating

Withdrawing from friends, family, and hobbies
Excessive thinking or talking about food, eating, or weight and shape

- ✓ Label and challenge all-or-nothing thinking, such as categorizing foods as "good" and "bad". **A balanced diet involves a little bit of everything.**
- ✓ Reduce the tendency to judge yourself and others based on appearance (that is, body shape or weight). Instead, try to **value yourself** based on your goals, efforts, talents, and character.

Physical

Sudden weight loss or weight gain
Complaints of stomach problems, bloating
Feeling cold easily
Feeling tired
Callouses on knuckles (caused by self-induced vomiting)
Fainting/dizziness

- ✓ Become a savvy consumer of the media and its messages about body images. You don't need to "buy" everything being sold to you!
- ✓ Avoid letting the way you feel about your body determine the course of your day.

What if I or someone I know needs more help?

If you or someone you care about struggles with eating disorder symptoms, talk to your doctor or a trusted adult. Here are several additional eating disorder resources that include help with getting treatment:

- ✓ [Eating Disorders: What Everyone Needs to Know](#)
- ✓ [National Eating Disorder Association](#)
- ✓ [National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders](#)

For more information about these eating disorder topics, check out the Columbia Center for Eating Disorders FEEDBLOG:

- ✓ **Body Image:** [Good, Bad and In-Between](#)
- ✓ **Signs** of Disordered Eating in Children and Teens
- ✓ **3 More Eating Disorder Myths Busted**