

Our Children Deserve More

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With the perpetual time constraints felt by most families, healthy eating is often neglected in favor of expediency and convenience. The good news is that according to [a recent study](#), the overall quality of children's diets has improved by 27 percent over less than two decades. The bad news: more than 50 percent still consume poor-quality diets.¹

Encouraging Signs - But Not Nearly Encouraging Enough

Using the American Heart Association (AHA) 2020 continuous diet score (range 0-50), the authors examined data from 31,420 youths from 1999-2000 to 2015-2016. The study found a general trend toward better eating in a number of areas:*

- Sugar-sweetened beverage consumption dropped from 2.0 to 1.0 servings per day.
- Overall added sugar consumption also dropped, from 106 to 71.4 grams per day.
- Total fruit and vegetable consumption increased from 1.62 to 1.81 servings per day.
- Poultry consumption increased from 0.28 to 0.36 servings per day.
- Egg consumption increased from 0.25 to 0.39 servings per day.
- Yogurt consumption increased from 0.03 to 0.06 servings per day.

The authors also found increases in consumption of plant omega-3 fats (from 116 to 146 mg/day), fiber (12.4 to 15.6 mg/d) and calcium (875 to 1,061 mg/d).

While the trend is positive, the data are still disturbing when you consider how many children continue to eat less-than-ideal diets, and in particular how many continue to eat poor-quality diets:

- The percentage of children with poor-quality diets *decreased* from 76.8 percent to 56.1 percent.
- The percentage of children with intermediate-quality diets *increased* from 23.2 percent to 43.7 percent.
- The percentage of children with ideal-quality diets *increased* from 0.07 percent to 0.25 percent.

Needless to say, diet quality was also positively impacted by higher parental education, greater household income and increased household food security status. Sadly, the authors also found that diet quality actually *decreases* as children age, with 39.8 percent of preschoolers (ages 2-5 years), 52.5 percent of grade-schoolers (ages 6-11 years) and 66.6 percent of teenagers (ages 12-19 years) pursuing poor diets.

A Need and an Opportunity

The take-home message for our profession is that many parents are significantly more aware of the dietary needs of their children; overall improvements in diet are a reflection of that awareness. Even so, more than half of our children and two-thirds of our teenagers are still functioning on poor diets (defined as less than 40 percent on the AHA scale). This creates both a need and an opportunity.

The need is educate your patients about the importance of a healthy diet for their children. This can include a list of preferred, essential and limited foods as a guideline for meals and snacks. A consistent flow of information from you, even in small bites, can make a big impact on the health of their children.

The opportunity comes as you discuss their children's health. This opens the door to making an appointment to provide their children with a complete health examination. It also brings into focus the need for supplements, particularly for teenagers, whose diets are likely less controllable.

With less than 1 percent of America's youth consuming ideal diets (at least 80 percent on the AHA scale) you can rest assured that a conversation with your patients will result in an improvement in their children's diet and ultimately their health. Teenagers are especially important, as they have the worst diets and may also be experiencing back, neck and other musculoskeletal pain.

Investments in better diets, supplements and consistent chiropractic care will pay major dividends in children's adult lives. This is something I know firsthand from my children (my oldest is now 40) and my own life. And you are the only health care provider who knows enough and cares enough to have those conversations with your patients.

*While some may not consider increased egg and poultry consumption "healthy," these foods likely replace significantly worse options, such as red meat, processed foods / snacks, etc.

Reference

1. Liu J, Rehm CD, Onopa J, et al. Trends in diet quality among youth in the United States, 1999-2016. *JAMA*, 2020;323(12):1161-1174.

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NOVEMBER 2020