

Problems Associated with Unhealthy Eating in Children

Most people might associate problems arising from malnourishment with underdeveloped countries, but even the wealthiest of countries have issues related to unhealthy eating patterns in children. Children need a well-rounded diet to be healthy, both mentally and physically. All food groups should be represented in their diets. Childhood obesity is growing at astounding rates, and we have only seen that increase further due to lock-downs and school closures since the start of the pandemic. Children need to be active for their bodies to develop strong muscles, bones, tendons, and to be flexible and agile. This in turn helps their mental growth and capabilities as well as their sleeping patterns. A child that has a well-rounded diet has more energy and less behavioral problems. Children who ingest lots of sugary drinks and snacks tend to have hyperactivity issues. The high sugar intake causes a massive release of insulin from the pancreas, leading to hypoglycemia (or the crash). This stimulates a release of epinephrine which causes nervous system reactions and can lead to hyperactivity disorders.

When children do not eat well, they can suffer from any number of issues just as adults. It is particularly important in young children because of the effect it may have on their growth and development. Children need fruits, vegetables and whole grains for proper bowel function, immunity and helping their bodies to absorb beneficial nutrients from other foods. The fiber they ingest from fruits and vegetables can be protective against excess weight gain and type 2 diabetes. Vitamin C helps their bodies to absorb iron from the iron-rich foods they eat. Iron helps to transport the oxygen rich blood for necessary functions throughout their bodies. Iron deficiency can cause children to be tired and short of breath, and their hair and skin to be dry and weak. Just as vitamin C helps to absorb the iron in foods, high calcium levels can prevent the absorption of iron. I see the correlation between high dairy intake and obesity in children in our WIC clinic very frequently. While dairy is a very important part of anyone's diet for bone and teeth development, we all need to practice moderation and just as too many sweets can rot the teeth, so can milk. Be sure to brush or help your child brush before naptime or bedtime. Ideally the only thing they should drink after brushing their teeth at night is water.

Protein is also essential to a healthy diet. Sources can be from meats such as beef, pork, poultry, venison, fish, seafood, etc. but it can also be from eggs, nuts or nut butters, soy, and dairy products like yogurt, cheese, and milk. Protein plays an essential role in many bodily functions. Children who do not take in enough protein may have a higher risk of bone fractures and muscle wasting. Protein is necessary for the growth and repair of tissues in the muscles, organs, skin, hair, and nails.

The child that has a healthy, well-rounded diet faces far less struggles. The healthy diet puts them on the right track for a healthy body and mind. They will have better learning skills, less developmental delays and problems focusing. They will feel and be more energetic, playful, and healthy. In my experience, a healthy child is a happy child.

For more information, please contact me at the Meigs County Health Department WIC Office at 740-992-0392.

Jenna Petry, RN

WIC Health Professional