Healthy vs. Unhealthy Eating Behaviors

What Families Should Know

Kids and teens often feel pressure to look a certain way. It's normal to want to be healthy, but harmful to chase unrealistic goals. Here's how to tell whether eating habits are supporting health or creating stress.

Healthy Eating Behaviors

Healthy habits help the body grow strong and build confidence, not anxiety.

- Eating a balance of proteins, whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats
- Working toward a weight that fits **your** child's body, not someone else's
- Understanding that healthy changes take **time**, not days
- Listening to hunger cues: eat when hungry, stop when satisfied
- Enjoying treats and special foods in moderation
- Moving the body regularly – walking, sports, dancing, or active play

Unhealthy Eating Behaviors

These patterns can harm physical or emotional health:

- Ignoring hunger, restricting food, or eating too little
- Trying to lose weight quickly or choosing unrealistic goals
- Cutting out entire food groups (like all carbs or all fats)
- Eating mostly processed foods with little nutrition
- Eating due to stress, sadness, boredom, or pressure – not hunger
- Exercising excessively or feeling guilty for resting
- Feeling shame, fear, or stress around food

How to Support a Healthy Mindset

- Ask: *Is this behavior helping my child feel strong, confident, and healthy?*
- Focus on energy, mood, strength, and overall well-being, not size
- Avoid negative talk about weight or body shape
- Model balanced, relaxed attitudes toward food
- Validate your child's feelings and pressures
- If you're worried, reach out to your UPMC CCP pediatric provider – we're here to help

Healthy eating should make kids feel fueled, confident, and happy – not *stressed* or *ashamed*. Encouraging balanced habits and positive body image sets the foundation for lifelong wellness.