

A little fat, sugar OK for kids if diet is healthy: study

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Do what's necessary to make nutrient-rich foods palatable, pediatricians say.

(HealthDay)—Cutting junk food from kids' diets is important, but if a little sugar and fat helps them eat their veggies, that's a good trade-off, a leading group of pediatricians says.

New recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics emphasize the importance of introducing kids to a wide variety of "whole foods"—from [fruits and vegetables](#), to whole grains and nuts, to fish and low-fat dairy.

And to do that, parents need to make the foods palatable, say the guidelines published online Feb. 23 in the journal *Pediatrics*.

In the last decade, "tremendous progress" has been made in improving the nutritional quality of meals and snacks available in U.S. schools, said Dr. Robert Murray, a professor of human nutrition at Ohio State University and co-author of the academy recommendations.

Still, Murray said, there is work to be done in revamping U.S. kids' overall diet—including the bag lunches and snacks that they bring to school.

And while it's important to limit [processed foods](#)—often high in sugar, salt or fat—parents shouldn't focus solely on cutting "bad" things from their kids' diets, Murray said.

"I think people can get thrown off track when a nutrient is labeled as 'bad,' " he said. "Whole categories of food may be thrown out."

If the only milk a young child will drink is flavored milk, for example, the extra sugar might be worth it—as long as the child's overall diet has limits on sugary foods, according to the academy recommendations.

Similarly, if a dash of brown sugar gets your child to eat oatmeal, or a little salt and fat—such as vegetable oil or cheese—will encourage him to eat his veggies, then parents shouldn't be afraid to use them, Murray said.

"Think of sweeteners, fat, salt and spices as ways to make nutrient-rich foods more palatable to children," he said.

Children's eating habits are a national concern because of the high prevalence of childhood obesity in the United States. As kids have fattened up on high-calorie foods, their diets have become limited or deficient in key nutrients, the guideline authors say.

The organization's advice is sound, said Wesley Delbridge, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

"A whole-diet approach is where it's at," Delbridge said. He agreed that judicious use of sugar, fat and salt can go far in getting kids to eat healthful foods.

"Kids like sauces and dips," Delbridge said. So they'll be more willing to eat vegetables, he noted, if they're served with a small amount of homemade ranch dressing made from low-fat yogurt, or hummus (a dip made from chickpeas).

It's also a good idea, Delbridge said, to involve kids in grocery shopping and meal preparation, and to give them choices—asking them which fruits or vegetables they want in their lunch, for instance.

Introducing a wide variety of [healthful foods](#) from an early age is important, but it also takes patience, Delbridge noted.

"It takes an average of 12 exposures to a new food for a child to accept it," he said. "Don't get discouraged if your child doesn't like something the first time. Try again, try it with different cooking techniques."

Sitting down to dinner as a family is also key, Delbridge said. It's a chance for parents to teach kids healthy [eating habits](#), and to "bond" with them, he said.

"Make dinner fun," he advised. "Those vegetables might end up becoming a 'comfort food' for your child, because they're tied to good memories."

And [kids](#) do not need to be deprived of all sweet treats, since that might only lead to craving, Delbridge and Murray said.

"Maybe you can move them from a chocolate chip cookie to an oatmeal raisin cookie," Murray said. "If you do little things like that, across the whole diet, it will make a difference."

Murray serves on speakers' bureaus for the National Dairy Council and the American Dairy Association.

More information: The U.S. Department of Agriculture has advice on [healthy meal planning](#).

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