

Get creative and cut kids' calories at summer cookouts

June 30 2016, by Leha Byrd



Credit: CDC Public Health Image Library

On July 4, a staple of the summer grilling season, many will revel again in the chance to enjoy food that comes off a hot grill and covers the picnic table. However, excessive amounts of sugar and salt are unhealthy

constants in some traditional cookout foods, including fatty meats and sugary sodas and punches.

For children, a summer full of cookouts can contribute to health issues. According to the World Health Organization, childhood obesity is one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century. Overweight and obese children are likely to stay obese into adulthood and are more likely to develop preventable diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

However, VCU Health experts say it is still possible for kids to enjoy summer delicacies in a healthy fashion, if parents ensure moderation and use creativity to provide delicious, nutritious food options.

"Look for options that are naturally bright and colorful," said Sonya Islam, a registered dietitian at Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU. "This will probably lead you to vegetables and fruits instead of cheese curls. For a healthy meal, make half of a child's plate vegetables and fruits that are prepared without a lot of extra fat or sugar."

Islam also suggests making healthy food choices the norm instead of an aberration. Many companies use celebrities to purposefully promote brands of soda and junk foods that are not considered healthy, but are attractive to their adolescent fans. However, for children who rely on their parents' dollars to eat, adults have the upper hand and can, to a degree, regulate their child's diet.

"One of the best things a parent can do is make unhealthy choices inconvenient. Instead, make healthy choices as easy as possible. Keep the cookies off the grocery list, and maybe enjoy a few every once in a while outside of the home instead of making them a regular part of the diet," Islam said. "Most kids would probably choose a high-sugar drink over plain water, so don't buy the sugary drinks."

If water is not appealing, flavoring seltzer water with a blend of citrus and other fruits can make a healthy choice more interesting. Islam recommends letting kids get involved by laying out a variety of cut fruit, creating a "bar of flavorings" for them to come up with their own custom flavor for their water.

Fruit kebabs and kebabs that include lean meat and vegetables are also ways to encourage healthy choices and portion control. Using whole grain buns for burgers and hot dogs adds fiber and extra nutrition. Additionally, take advantage of outdoor events and good weather by staying active, experts say.

"Fun options include jumping rope, throwing a ball or Frisbee, hula hooping or just dancing to your favorite music," Islam said, adding that in the absence of a good diet and exercise, a child's health can become fragile at an early age.

"We're seeing the development of fatty liver disease, high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol levels in young kids. These used to be considered diseases that might affect older adults, but we're now facing the idea that children will live shorter lives, or less fulfilling lives, because they are managing decades of complications from these diet-related conditions," she said. "Just like a lot of small decisions can lead to getting unhealthy, improving health happens one decision at a time."

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

Citation: Get creative and cut kids' calories at summer cookouts (2016, June 30) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-06-creative-kids-calories-summer-cookouts.html>

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