

# Youth Obesity and Healthy Eating

## Activities Supplement

by Gina Halpin

Obesity among Irish teenagers is increasing. A recent survey – *The Voice of Young People*, carried out by researchers from UCD and UCC shows that 19% of teenage boys today are overweight, compared to just 6% in 1990, with the figure for girls rising from 15% to 17%. The survey also shows that a third of 13-17 year olds do not eat any fruit, four in five teenagers are not getting enough fibre, and over half exceed the recommended daily fat intake.

Although obesity can be a side effect of hormonal change taking place during adolescence, the primary cause of obesity in young people is due to excessive calorie intake and sedentary lifestyles. Young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are the most inactive generation, with more being driven to school, opting out of sports and spending hours in front of a computer or T.V. screen. This Activity Supplement looks at obesity among teens in Ireland today and provides activities and resources for youth workers that can be used with their youth groups to raise awareness of this issue.



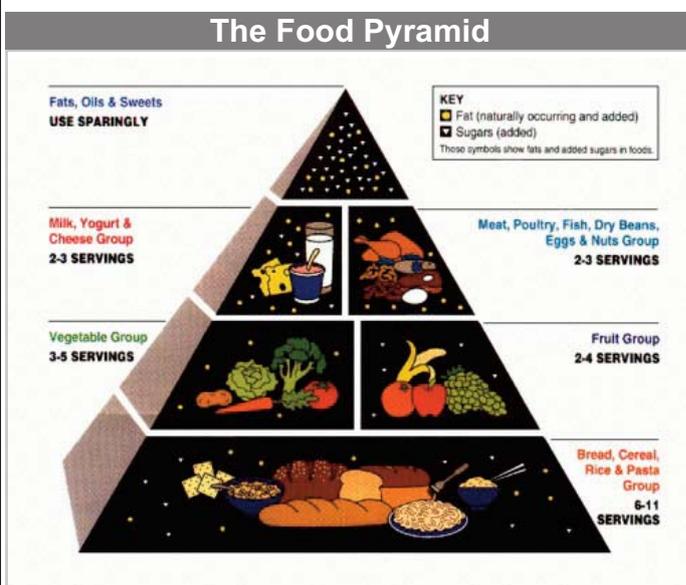
### Introduction – A Balanced Diet

Eating well is an important part of maintaining good health and avoiding obesity, however the most important aspect of eating well is to maintain a balanced diet and be aware of calorie intake. Since teenagers' bodies are going through intense physical changes they need larger amounts of calories than the 2,000 calories recommended each day for adults: they need 2,200 calories per day for girls and 2,500-3,000 calories per day for boys.

### Activity One: What is a balanced diet?

**Aim:** To review eating habits and inform young people about basic nutrition and food groups.

**Materials:** Flipchart, markers, Post-it notes and a copy of the food pyramid (a larger version can be downloaded from the Internet - see Google Images)



Start by asking young people what food they enjoy eating and make a list of the favourite things they say. Conclude that everyone likes different things; some have a sweet tooth while others prefer savoury foods.

Stress to the young people that a balanced diet can include all food types and that food is neither 'good' nor 'bad', the vital thing to achieving a healthy diet is to get the balance right.

Next set the young people the task of recording everything they ate and drank that day. Stress that there should be no cheating and they need to record **everything**.

Then divide the young people into smaller groups and hand each a small wad of post-its and pens.

Ask each group to discuss their food records and write the types of foods and drinks they consumed onto different Post-it notes. Food that has been eaten by more than one young person i.e. crisps, should be written only once.



Next, hand out the **Food Group Pyramids**, and set the young people the task of deciding which Post-it note go into which category of food. Once this is completed, review what each group has.

1. Which food group has the most Post-it notes in?
2. Which food groups have very few in?
3. How do they make choices about what they eat?
4. What factors do they consider when making food decisions?

Suggest a healthy balanced diet consists of:

- 33% - Fruit & Vegetables – provides fibre & vitamins
- 33% - Carbohydrates – provides energy
- 15% - Milk and Dairy – provides vitamins, minerals & calcium
- 12% - Meat and Fish – provides protein iron & zinc
- 7% - Fatty foods & sugary – provides very little nutritional value

Suggest to the group that they consider ways to introduce more foods from the first two groups into everyday eating. *For example* eating a banana instead of a bar of chocolate at break or having a baked potato instead of chips.

**Remember** reinforce the idea that a balanced diet is not about giving up foods they love but is about balancing food eating to stay safe and avoid storing up unnecessary calories.

**Source:** *Body: Physical Health and Wellbeing Activities for Young People.*

## Activity Two

### Selling Obesity Food Survey

**Aim:** To get young people to look at the health issues that are associated with our fast food culture, and the advertising of it and to compile their own survey of the food they eat.

**Materials:** Duplicate & distribute the **Food Survey questions**.

**Food Survey - On average, each week:**

1. How much soft drinks do you consume?
2. How many bags of crisps or chips do you eat?
3. How often do you eat sweets or chocolate bars?
4. How often do you eat cakes?
5. How often do you eat sweetened cereal?
6. How often to you eat at fast food restaurants?
7. Which is your favourite fast food restaurant?
8. How often do you “super-size” your order?

Once the young people have completed the survey, discuss their answers - some suggested questions:

**Do** they consider fast food to be a significant part of teen culture today? Why or why not?

**What** are some of the reasons why young people consume so much junk food and fast food?

**What** are the positive and negative elements of fast food?

**How** much difference does super-sizing make?

Using McDonalds’ hamburgers and chips as an example, give them the calorie and fat measurements of regular servings then have them guess the super-sized equivalents:

 <p>McDonalds Hamburger: 270 calories, 9 grams of fat, 3.5 grams of saturated fat</p>	 <p>McDonalds Big Xtra: 710 calories, 46 grams of fat, 15 grams of saturated fat</p>
 <p>McDonalds Small French Fries: 210 calories, 10 grams of fat, 1.5 grams of saturated fat</p>	 <p>McDonalds Super Size French Fries: 610 calories, 29 grams of fat, 5 grams of saturated fat</p>

**Source:** [www.media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca)

## Activity Three Working Out

**Aim:** To increase awareness of our levels of physical activity and to get the young people to make up a personal plan in relation to introducing regular exercise into their daily routines.

**Materials:** Flip chart paper and copies of **My Exercises Worksheet** – see below.

Put a sheet of paper with ‘**very fit**’ written on it at one end of the room and another with ‘**unfit**’ written on it at the other end of the room.

Ask the young people to place themselves in relation to the two ends of the continuum.

Remind them that many everyday activities help to build fitness, such as walking to school, cycling, walking the dog and housework - these all impact on our fitness levels.

In a large group ask the young people to list all the benefits of being fit.



### Useful Discussion Questions to Consider:

1. Lots of people believe that too much screen time can get in the way of a healthy lifestyle. Do you agree? Why or Why not? How can you incorporate t.v., computer, video games into an active life?
2. What are some of the creative ways you can incorporate exercise into your day that doesn't involve joining a team?
3. What's most important to you? Why?
4. How do food decisions affect your life?

Hand out copies of ‘My Exercise Worksheet’ and ask each person to complete it individually.

## My Exercise Worksheet

Everyday Activities: \_\_\_\_\_

Planned Exercise / Sport (what and how often): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My Personal Programme: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Everyday Activities ( make choices which involve some exercise i.e. walk instead of car/bus): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Planned Activities/Sport (ideally 3 times a week for at least 20mins each time): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What might the barriers be (bad weather, school work etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What will keep me motivate? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How will I reward myself?: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Source: Spiced Up: A resource book for working with young women*

## Activity 4 Food True and False

**Aim:** This activity is an opportunity to challenge some of the myths and stereotypes about food and assess young people's knowledge about food and provide them with information about nutrition.

Read the following statements and ask the young people to move to the left side of the room if they think the statement is true and to the right side of the room if they think the statement is false. Designate an area between the two extremes in the middle of the room as a ‘don't know’ area.

Spend time discussing each statement, encouraging the young people to explain their decisions and where they get their information from.

**Q. Vegetarian diets are healthier!**

**False** – Vegetarian diets can be very healthy, but not if all you eat is chips and crackers! To be healthy, if you are not eating meat or fish, you need to eat food that will give you protein and minerals.

**Q. If you take vitamin C tablets you don't need to eat fruit!**

**False** – The vitamin C tablets don't provide all the nutrients that fruit does

**Q. There is more vitamin C in a Kiwi fruit than an orange!**

**True** – All fruit and vegetables are high in vitamin C but Kiwi fruit is the best.

**Q. Eating breakfast is the best start to the day you can give your body!**

**True** – Breakfast keeps your blood sugar levels up and gives you energy and stops you from snacking mid-morning. Porridge is one of the best breakfasts you can eat, while breakfast bars are among the worst.

**Q. Dairy products make you fat!**

**False** – Eating dairy products as part of a balanced diet won't make you fat, however some dairy products are high in saturate fats.

**Q. Diet drinks are better for you than the normal ones!**

**False** – Even though they contain less sugar they contain more sugar substitutes which are often acidic and will damage tooth enamel. They also contain very few nutrients.

**Q. You should aim to drink six to eight glasses of water a day!**

**True** – Keeping hydrated can help concentration, stop you feeling tired and lethargic and improve skin

**Q. Boiling vegetables is the healthiest way to cook them!**

**False** – Steaming is the healthiest way to cook vegetables, as it retain the nutrients more than boiling

**Q. You should have no more than 6 grams of salt a day!**

**True** – Too much salt is not good for you. Look at the salt content in crisps to get an ideal of how much salt you could be consuming.

**Q. Fast food takeaways are fine to have once in a while!**

**True** – Being healthy is not about giving up everything you love to eat, but about getting the balance right.

**Source: Body:** *Physical Health and Wellbeing Activities for Young People*



## Useful Resources

**NHS Choices – Your Health Your Choices**  
[www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Goodfood/Pages/Goodfoodhome.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Goodfood/Pages/Goodfoodhome.aspx)

**Kids Health**

[www.kidshealth.org/teen/food\\_fitness/](http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/food_fitness/)

**Youth Health Talk**

[www.youthhealthtalk.org](http://www.youthhealthtalk.org)

**Health Promotion** [www.healthpromotion.ie](http://www.healthpromotion.ie)

**Bodywhys** [www.bodywhys.ie](http://www.bodywhys.ie)

**Irish Health** [www.irishhealth.com](http://www.irishhealth.com)

**National Youth Health Programme**

[www.youthhealth.ie](http://www.youthhealth.ie)

**Spunout** [www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie)

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