

A parent's toolkit for healthy eating

March means spring break for some and perhaps a family trip. And you can bet most children won't be eating healthy every day during those getaways. Room service pizza. Ice cream at a theme park. Hey, you're on vacation after all.

Whether you're snapping back to healthy habits after a warm weather excursion or just starting from scratch, it's important for kids to establish good eating behaviors early.

[Jaya Wadhawan, MD](#), an OSF HealthCare pediatrician, admits it's tough.

"Unhealthy foods and beverages have been embedded in TV shows, websites and online games that children see," she says. "That's been shown to influence eating behaviors."

In other words, a youngster sees their favorite cartoon character constantly drinking milkshakes, and they'll want to follow suit.

Too much of that behavior could lead to a litany of issues, Dr. Wadhawan says: obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, poor heart health, fatty liver, poor bone growth, iron deficiency, cavities and even cancer later in life.

But on the flip side:

"Good nutrition can improve your cognitive function and memory. Children would benefit from that in the classroom," Dr. Wadhawan says. "It improves your mood and energy. It boosts your immunity. And it supports muscle and bone growth."

Some tips and guidelines for parents:

- Dr. Wadhawan recommends the 5-2-1-0 rule. Each day, aim for five servings of fruits and vegetables, two hours of screen time or less, one hour of exercise and zero sugary drinks like soda or juice.
- When filling out the plate, Dr. Wadhawan likes the guidelines from [MyPlate](#), a program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Half the plate is taken up by fruits and vegetables. One quarter is a grain. The last quarter is protein, accompanied by a healthy dairy drink.
- Make mealtime an event to connect with family members. Have everyone sit down at the kitchen table. Talk to each other. Ask about your child's day. Avoid letting kids eat in the living room or bedroom.
- Involve kids in meal preparation.

"Bring them to the grocery store and show them all the foods. Have them help pick out the food. It gets them more interested in eating," Dr. Wadhawan says.

But with young eyes watching, adults must be healthy eating role models. Don't buy unhealthy food on those grocery trips.

- Children can get involved with cooking, too. Let them use kid-safe utensils to cut fruits and vegetables and mix sauces. Craft foods into fun shapes. Give the morsels fun names.

"It gets them excited to eat what they created," Dr. Wadhawan says.

- Fruits and vegetables can be a tough sell with kids. Parents can include small bits of veggies in fruit smoothies or spaghetti sauce. Let kids dunk the carrots or cucumbers in a healthy dip. Mix fruits into muffins.
- Any parent knows mornings can be rushed. A grab-and-go breakfast like yogurt, peanut butter on toast or a smoothie ensures kids have a healthy start to the day.
- Young people are curious. They may want to know why dinner features this food over that one. Show them pictures and videos of how healthy foods benefit the body.
- Allowing kids to indulge on occasion won't derail their healthy lifestyle, Dr. Wadhawan says.

"We all like our sweet snacks and fun desserts every once in a while. I always say: everything in moderation," Dr. Wadhawan says.

That means pour out a few chips into a bowl instead of letting your child run away with the whole bag.

Visit the [OSF HealthCare website](#) for healthy recipes.