

Cooperative Extension

Promoting Healthy Families, Schools and Communities: Making a Difference

Active Teens, Healthier Communities:

Building Habits That Last

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Although physical activity offers powerful benefits for teens, it is increasingly rare in their daily lives. With packed schedules and the constant pull of screens, movement often takes a back seat. In fact, only 20% to 28% of youth ages 6 to 17 meet the national recommendation of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity each day. But, with the right mindset and access to fun and engaging options, teens can break the cycle of inactivity and build healthy habits that last a lifetime.

Understanding the Benefits and Types of Physical Activity

Regular physical activity reduces the risk of chronic health conditions, such as heart disease and Type II diabetes, while also boosting mental health, cognitive function, and academic performance. To build a strong foundation for lifelong health, teens should aim to include all three types of physical activity in their weekly routine as each play a unique role in supporting physical development and long-term well-being:

- **Aerobic activities** – like running, biking, or dancing – boost heart health and improve endurance.
- **Muscle-strengthening exercises** – such as push-ups, climbing, or resistance training – build strength and support overall fitness.
- **Bone-strengthening movements** – like jumping, sports, or weight-bearing activities – help increase bone density and reduce the risk of future bone-related issues.

Making Physical Activity Part of Everyday Life

Getting a teenager off the couch can feel like a challenge, but with the right strategies in place, it becomes much easier to spark their interest and build lasting habits.

How Families Can Inspire Movement:

- **Support Their Interests:** Encourage your teens to participate in sports or activities they genuinely enjoy—whether it’s soccer, dance, or skateboarding.
- **Make It a Family Affair:** Plan regular family outings that involve movement, like evening walks, weekend hikes, or bike rides around the neighborhood.

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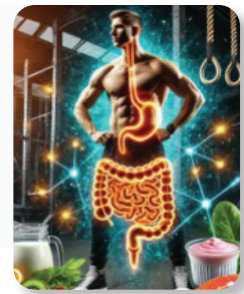
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The Gut-Muscle Connection:

Build Strength from Within

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Bodybuilding requires more than dedication to lifting weights and consuming protein; it also demands a healthy foundation inside your body. Research shows that gut health, the balance of bacteria and microbes in your digestive system, can significantly impact muscle growth, recovery, and overall performance. Supporting your gut microbiome could be the key to maximizing bodybuilding gains.

Main Points:

Gut Health and Muscle Growth Protein is essential for muscle repair, but without a healthy gut, your body may struggle to absorb it effectively. Beneficial gut bacteria help break down food and ensure that amino acids and nutrients reach your muscles. A balanced microbiome acts like a supportive team, increasing your body's ability to build lean mass.

➔ **Tip: Add fiber-rich foods like oats and leafy greens to your diet to feed beneficial gut bacteria.**

Faster Recovery through Gut Health Intense workouts often cause inflammation, leading to soreness and slower recovery. Healthy gut bacteria produce short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs), which have natural anti-inflammatory properties. These compounds help reduce muscle soreness and speed up recovery, so you can train harder and more consistently.

➔ **Tip: Include fermented foods like kimchi or yogurt to boost SCFA production.**



Gut Health and Lean Body Composition Certain gut bacteria influence how your body stores fat and burns energy. A diverse microbiome is associated with better metabolic health and lower body fat percentages. This makes gut health essential for bodybuilders aiming to stay lean while building muscle.

➔ **Tip: Foods rich in polyphenols, such as berries and green tea, support a diverse microbiome.**

Hydration for Gut and Muscle Performance Hydration is crucial for gut health and muscle performance. Dehydration disrupts digestion and nutrient absorption, potentially limiting your gains. Proper hydration helps nutrients move smoothly through the digestive system, supporting both gut health and recovery.

➔ **Tip: Aim for consistent water intake throughout the day and use low-sugar electrolyte drinks during intense workouts.**

Gut health might not be the first thing bodybuilders think about, but it plays a vital role in muscle growth, recovery, and overall performance. By supporting your gut microbiome with nutritious foods, hydration, and fermented products, you're giving your body the foundation it needs to perform at its best. True strength starts from within.

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“Food as Medicine”

in the U.S Healthcare System

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The “Food as Medicine” movement advocates for the integration of nutritious food into healthcare strategies, particularly for managing diet-related conditions like type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. It is based on the growing body of evidence showing that what we eat plays a primary role in the prevention and treatment of disease. “Food as Medicine” sits at the intersection of nutrition and medical care, aiming to shift the standard from treating illness to promoting wellness.

Recognizing this critical link, the Department of Health and Human Services has taken a leading role in advancing “Food as Medicine” projects and supporting programs that bring food directly into healthcare, like including medically tailored meal delivery programs for those recovering from surgery or living with chronic illness. Additionally, “produce prescription” vouchers for fruits and vegetables are offered to patients in food-insecure areas. These efforts help patients access healthy foods and learn how to use them while attending educational classes that are integrated into care plans.

Studies have shown that lifestyle modifications, particularly dietary changes, can significantly improve blood sugar levels, blood pressure, and cholesterol, reducing the need for medications and lowering healthcare costs. Incorporating more whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats while reducing processed foods and added sugars can have a measurable impact on cardiometabolic health. These changes not only support weight management but also improve insulin sensitivity and cardiovascular outcomes.

A notable “Food as Medicine” <https://odphp.health.gov/foodismedicine> example is the Recipe4Health program, <https://recipe4health.acgov.org/> which supported over 5,000 people in improving their diets and physical activity. Within 12 months, participants reported better blood sugar control, lower cholesterol, and reduced food insecurity. They also reported feeling more confident in making healthier food choices, confirming that access to nutritious food and education can lead to meaningful change. Moreover, this approach empowers individuals to take an active role in their own health by learning practical cooking and meal planning skills.

When individuals gain the knowledge and confidence to prepare healthy meals at home, they gain control over their nutritional intake and reduce dependence on processed and fast foods. Cooking skills not only support personal health, but also benefit entire households, encouraging family meals, and healthier habits in children.

Community programs and healthcare partnerships, such as the Hudson County Produce Prescription Program led by Rutgers and City Green’s nutrition incentives programs, provide fresh produce and nutrition education to study participants. These educational opportunities empower individuals to make healthier choices, even with limited time or resources. They foster a sense of self-sufficiency in managing chronic conditions.

Ultimately, “Food as Medicine” reframes the role of nutrition from a passive background factor to an active, therapeutic tool. It is a practical, people-centered solution that addresses both health outcomes and social determinants of health. With continued support and expansion, this movement has the power to change lives—one plate at a time.

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A Menu for Menopause:

Nutrition and Lifestyle for a Healthy Transition

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Menopause is a natural biological process marking the end of menstruation, typically occurring between ages 45 and 55. This transition is driven by a decline in estrogen and other reproductive hormones, often accompanied by symptoms such as hot flashes, sleep disturbances, mood swings, and increased risk for chronic diseases like osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic syndrome.

While menopause is a life stage, not a disease, it presents an important opportunity to focus on nutrition and lifestyle habits that support long-term health and well-being. Research shows that dietary patterns can significantly affect how women experience menopause and their risk for related chronic conditions.

The Role of Nutrition During Menopause

A balanced, nutrient-rich diet is key for managing symptoms and promoting healthy aging. Diets high in fiber, antioxidants, phytoestrogens, omega-3 fatty acids, calcium, and vitamin D are especially beneficial. The Mediterranean diet, for example, has been associated with reduced hot flashes, night sweats and improved cardiovascular and bone health in postmenopausal women.

Focus on:

- ✓ **Calcium and Vitamin D-rich foods** (like dairy, fortified plant milks, leafy greens) help preserve bone mineral density and reduce fracture risk
- ✓ **Phytoestrogens**, naturally found in soy products and flaxseeds, may reduce hot flashes by mimicking estrogen's function in the body; however, research has shown mixed results, be sure to consult your healthcare provider
- ✓ **Whole grains, legumes, fruits, and vegetables** are high in fiber and antioxidants, supporting heart health and weight management
- ✓ **Healthy fats from fatty fish, avocados, and nuts** contribute anti-inflammatory benefits and help reduce cardiovascular risk

Limit:

- ✓ **Refined carbohydrates** such as white rice, white bread, and pasta may be linked to earlier menopause and blood sugar fluctuations that may contribute to fatigue and mood instability
- ✓ **High-sugar, high-fat diets** are associated with increased risk of weight gain, abdominal fat accumulation, and more frequent hot flashes
- ✓ **Excessive alcohol consumption** may accelerate the onset of menopause and is linked to higher risk of breast cancer and poor sleep quality
- ✓ **Highly processed foods** are often high in sodium, added sugars, and unhealthy fats; these can promote inflammation and negatively impact metabolic and cardiovascular health

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Sample "Menu for Menopause"

Here are four simple meals that incorporate menopause-friendly foods:

Breakfast: Greek yogurt parfait with ground flaxseeds, berries, and walnuts (Rich in calcium, fiber, and omega-3s).

Lunch: Grilled salmon over mixed greens with olive oil vinaigrette and roasted sweet potatoes (Provides anti-inflammatory fats, folate, and vitamin A).

Snack: Low-fat cottage cheese with sliced pear and a handful of almonds (Offers calcium and protein for bone health, healthy fats and magnesium to support blood pressure and metabolism).

Dinner: Stir-fry with tofu, broccoli, and quinoa (High in plant protein, iron, bone-supporting nutrients).

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A Menu for Menopause:

Nutrition and Lifestyle for a Healthy Transition - continued from page 4



Lifestyle Matters

Beyond nutrition, regular physical activity, adequate sleep, and stress management all contribute to symptom relief and overall quality of life. Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity per week, plus strength training twice weekly to preserve muscle mass and support metabolic health. Additionally, staying hydrated and avoiding excessive caffeine or alcohol intake can help manage hot flashes and sleep disturbances.

Active Teens, Healthier Communities:

Building Habits That Last - continued from page 1



- **Try Something New Together:** Explore new activities as a team—sign up for a Zumba class, join a local run club, or take a beginner's yoga session.
- **Set Healthy Boundaries with Screens:** Limit screen time and replace it with active alternatives—turn “scroll time” into “stroll time.”

Tips for Teens to Get Moving:

- **Try Something New:** Shake up your routine with a fresh activity—whether it's hiking, dancing, swimming, or something totally different.
- **Make Time for Movement:** Schedule exercise like any other important task. Add it to your calendar and treat it like a commitment.
- **Find an Accountability Buddy:** It's easier (and more fun) to stay active when you have a friend cheering you on or joining in.
- **Use Tech to Your Advantage:** Turn screen time into active time with apps and games like Nike Training Club, Just Dance, or Ring Fit Adventure. Challenge your friends and make it social!

Creating a supportive environment and helping teens find joy in movement can turn exercise into a lasting habit—one that builds confidence, health, and lifelong well-being.

Want to learn more? Check out our fact sheet, [“Building a Culture of Movement: Creative Ways to Promote Physical Activity Among Teenagers,”](#) for more strategies that make physical activity fun, accessible, and sustainable for teens.

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Choosing a Financial Advisor:

What You Need to Know

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Many people think about hiring a financial advisor when their personal finances get complex (e.g., accumulated wealth, increased taxes, and multiple streams of income) or when a major life event occurs (e.g., retirement, birth of a child, and death of a spouse).

They are not alone. A 2023 study found that 44% of American adults said they were working with a financial professional and 88% said working with a financial professional would be helpful. The following are some key take-aways about selecting financial services professionals:



- ◆ **Have a “Why”-** Financial advisors are helpful in the following situations: retirement planning and determining if you have enough savings, decumulation (spending down assets) decisions, major life transitions (e.g., marriage and divorce), receipt of windfalls (e.g., inheritances, life insurance, and large prizes), and when required minimum distributions (RMDs) from tax-deferred retirement savings plans must begin.
- ◆ **Consider the Benefits-** Financial advisors can offer personalized financial guidance, expertise in tax planning and investments, retirement and estate planning guidance, a holistic approach to financial management decisions, objective third party insights and questions, and behavioral coaching to prevent emotional investing mistakes.
- ◆ **Learn the “Alphabet Soup”-** Key designations that financial advisors hold include accredited financial counselor (AFC®), certified financial planner (CFP®), chartered financial consultant (ChFC®), certified public accountant personal financial specialist (CPA/PFS), and chartered retirement planning counselor (CRPC®).
- ◆ **Prepare a List of Questions-** Good questions to ask prospective financial advisors are: 1. What are your qualifications and certifications?, 2. How long have you been a financial advisor?, 3. What types of clients do you typically work with?, 4. Are you a fiduciary (obligated to act in clients’ best interest and prioritize clients over personal gain)?, and 5. Have you ever been subject to any disciplinary actions? (be sure to double-check this!).
- ◆ **Know the Cost-** Good questions to ask about a financial advisor’s compensation and fees include: 1. How do you get paid (fee-only, commission-based, or fee-based)?, 2. Do you earn commissions from financial products that you recommend?, 3. Will you provide a breakdown of all costs before I hire you?, and 4. Is there a minimum amount of assets required to work with you?
- ◆ **Ask About Investment Strategy-** Good questions to ask include: 1. How do you approach asset allocation (the weighting of assets like stocks, bonds, and cash equivalents like money market funds and certificates of deposit) in clients’ portfolios?, 2. How do you manage risk in volatile markets?, and 3. What types of financial products do you recommend most often?
- ◆ **Ask About Client Interaction-** Good questions to ask include: 1. How often will we meet to review my financial plan?, 2. Do you provide tax planning and estate planning advice or do you refer this work out?, 3. What happens if I leave your firm or you leave your firm?, and 4. Can you provide references from current clients?
- ◆ **Go Prepared with Information-** This is especially important if you select a fee-only financial advisor that charges an hourly rate. Before seeing the advisor, prepare a net worth statement (assets minus debts), a cash flow statement (income minus expenses), a list of financial questions, and a list of your financial goals. Also gather documents related to your financial questions (e.g., bank and investment statements and insurance policies).
- ◆ **Do Your Due Diligence-** Search for financial advisors in your local area on websites like www.napfa.org, www.plannersearch.org, and www.letsmakeaplan.org and interview several that best match your search criteria. Beware of red flags like lack of transparency about fee structure and promises of guaranteed returns.



