



Don't Count Your Kid's Calories

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The following is from an article published in a parents' magazine:

My 12 year-old pre-teen daughter seems to be gaining weight at a rapid pace. How many calories a day should she be eating?

-Leslie

Weight gain and rapid growth are common around this age due to the physical changes that occur during adolescence. Girls typically show the first signs of puberty between the ages of 8 and 13 (boys usually begin puberty around 9 to 14 years.) During puberty, many dramatic physical and hormonal changes take place that will transition your daughter from a little girl to a young woman. This is when you will notice a growth spurt and sexual development.

There are also many important emotional and social changes that take place during puberty. This can be a difficult time for many adolescents (and their parents!) She will become more independent from her parents but more affected by her peer group. She will begin to develop her relationship skills. She will also begin to think and see her world in a different way and will achieve a new sense of self.

During adolescence, the amount of muscle tissue increases in both girls and boys, while the body fat percentage (the amount of fat tissue compared to other types of tissue) increases in girls and decreases in boys. These physical changes require an increase in calorie and nutrient intake. The number of calories a person needs at any given time is affected by many factors besides age. Some of these include height and weight, activity level, stage of growth and development, genetic factors, certain health conditions, and many other things. Therefore, it is very difficult to tell you exactly how many calories your daughter needs right now.

Unless there is a serious concern about malnutrition, focusing on a specific calorie intake or a specific weight at this stage (or any stage for that matter) can lead to other problems. Girls and young women are very vulnerable to the pressures of our society – especially her peer group, to be thin. Studies have shown that eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia may start with an innocent attempt to diet and control weight. In my work as a weight

management specialist in adults, I have also seen that dieting leads to a preoccupation with food and the development of abnormal eating patterns.

If you are concerned that your daughter is gaining too much weight, I would encourage you to take her in for a check up. However, make sure that the visit is “health focused,” not “weight focused.” Her doctor will plot her height and weight on a growth chart to see if her weight gain is appropriate for her stage of development and can advise you both about the importance of good nutrition during this critical time period.

At home, be sure to provide plenty of healthy meals and snacks and set a good example with your own eating habits. However, never make certain foods “bad” or “forbidden,” since that only increases their desirability. Be sure to provide plenty of opportunity for physical activity – even if that means going along for a bike ride or game of tennis. And most importantly, during this time of inevitable struggles as she becomes a healthy adult, be sure that your home is a place of unconditional love and acceptance.

For additional information, also see the Patient Educational Tool “Key Steps for Preventing and Treating Childhood Weight Problems” available at www.AmIHungry.com.

Michelle May, M.D., a Board Certified Family Physician, developed the Am I Hungry? Multidimensional Weight Management System (www.AmIHungry.com). She has served as president of the Arizona Academy of Family Physicians and has been active in the American Academy of Family Physicians, the Arizona Medical Association, and many other professional and community organizations. She writes and speaks widely on healthy approaches to weight management. Contact her at MMay@AmIHungry.com or 480 704-7811.