

Eat Your Greens

How many vegetables did you eat yesterday?
In the past week? This month?

Do you eat as many vegetables as you should?
Do you exercise as much as you should?

A new report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control describes what kinds of choices teenagers are making. They conducted a survey about eating healthy foods and getting exercise. 2,100 teenagers in our state took part in the survey.

According to the report, teens in our state are not as overweight or obese as teens around the country. But teens here don't get as much exercise as others, though they do get more physical education at school than many others.

	State	Country
Overweight	12%	16%
Obese	9%	12%
Physically active for 60 minutes per day	72%	82%
Did not attend physical education (P.E.) classes	76%	67%

Health officials stress that if a person starts eating healthy food at a young age, they are more likely to continue making healthy choices as they get older. "It's especially important to get children involved in the whole process. They need to know about growing food, cooking it, eating it," explains dietician Anne Roberts. "We want students to think about where their food comes from. They should think about what they are putting into their bodies."

George Davis, high school science teacher, agrees. "The students in my horticulture class grow vegetables in a small greenhouse garden

in the fall and spring. When the vegetables are ready, we take them to the elementary school to share." The high school students explain to the younger kids how the vegetables are grown. They encourage them to try all the different kinds, even the things they've never had before or that they think they don't like. "We invite the younger students to come visit our garden," says Mr. Davis. "We want to get the young kids excited about growing and eating healthy foods.



The horticulture students get together with the home economics students twice a year. They use the fresh vegetables to make jars of salsa and marinara sauce to sell. The money they raise pays for field trips and garden supplies.

But how many vegetables are the teenagers eating each day?

"I like lots of vegetables," says 15-year-old Marissa Yamamoto. "I'll eat them if someone serves them to me. But I don't go looking for them." She guesses that she ate two servings of vegetables each day in the past week.

The USDA recommends five servings of fruits and vegetables each day.

According to the survey, only 18% of teenagers in the state eat that many. Nationwide, 22% reported eating at least five servings each day.

Consider these questions from the survey:

- Have you eaten any carrots in the past seven days? 55% of students in this state said “yes.”
- Have you eaten a salad in the past seven days? 68% said “yes.”
- Have you eaten a potato in the past seven days? (French fries and other fried potatoes don’t count!) 77% of the teenagers said “yes.”
- Have you eaten vegetables at all? 13% of the students said they hadn’t eaten a single vegetable in the past week.

Why eat vegetables at all? “Vegetables are full of vitamins, minerals and fiber that the body needs,” said Anne Roberts. “The color of the vegetable helps us know what nutrients are in it.”

Red fruits and vegetables include tomatoes, watermelon and strawberries. They are full of lycopene. Lycopene is an antioxidant that helps to fight heart disease and some cancers.



Yellow and orange vegetables and fruits include carrots and sweet potatoes. They include apricots, oranges and pineapple. These foods are rich in vitamin C. Vitamin C strengthens the immune system. It may help fend off colds and flu. They contain folate, a B vitamin, which reduces heart disease. Many of these foods, including corn and pears, are also high in fiber.

Fiber helps you feel full longer and helps your digestive system work more effectively.

Green vegetables such as spinach, broccoli and cabbage are also high in antioxidants and many other nutrients. They help your eyesight by strengthening the retina in your eyes. They may reduce cancer. They are also high in fiber.

Blue and purple fruits and vegetables such as eggplant and blueberries are rich sources of antioxidants and fiber. They may help your body fight harmful chemicals and pollutants.

Anne Roberts suggests eating a rainbow of naturally-colored fruits and vegetables every day. “Eating at least one food from each color group will make sure that you get at least five servings, as recommended. And that you get a wide range of the nutrients that will help you be healthy and strong. Getting the right nutrients will also help you look better and have more energy.”

School district officials describe other benefits of eating healthy food. “Proper nutrition increases school attendance. It helps students pay attention in class and improves memory and academic performance.”

School districts across the state are replacing cafeteria food with healthier options. Many schools are taking candy and soda out of the vending machines.

“But there’s lots of good food – delicious food – for the kids,” says Mr. Davis. “Next week, the high school cafeteria is serving pizza made with sauce from tomatoes grown in our very own garden! It doesn’t get much better than that.”