



Successful meal planning

As parents, you will be planning, preparing and supervising your child's meals. We don't encourage teens to take a large part in meal planning at the beginning of their treatment for an eating disorder. Your teen can make some choices, but should not be responsible for planning what to eat.

Ingrid Toombs, the Registered Dietitian on the team, will help you with meal planning. During meetings with the dietitian, changes are sometimes made to the meal plan. It is important that you (both parents) attend these meetings with your child, so that the meal plan can be followed successfully.

There are some common problems that parents face when planning meals. This information sheet can help you know how to handle these situations. If you have questions or need more information, please call Ingrid at 905-521-2100, ext. 73199.

When planning meals, it is important to remember:

- ✓ Our bodies need energy to run.
 - ✓ Energy comes from the carbohydrates, fats and proteins in food.
 - ✓ We should give our bodies energy throughout the day.
 - ✓ All foods can be part of a healthy meal plan. There are no forbidden foods.
 - ✓ Fat is an essential nutrient. We need it for energy and for our bodies to take in certain vitamins.
 - ✓ Fat is important for regulating appetite. It helps us feel full, so we don't overeat.
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What if my teen wants to change the meal plan?

Teens sometimes want to change their meal plan around. For example, not having milk at breakfast, but saving it for lunch. Usually what is behind the request is anxiety about having to eat the food at all.

Important nutrients and calories can sometimes be missed if too many changes are made. If a meal plan is not working well, speak with the dietitian. She will help you make changes so that it works better for your family.

Common statements teens make when trying to negotiate a change in the meal plan:

- Can't I just have a big salad instead of a chicken breast?
- I'm really full, Mom. I can't eat this now. I'll finish it later.
- This is crazy... no one eats like this. This is so unfair.
- Don't you think this is too much food too?
You (or my friends) don't eat like this.
- You don't know anything about nutrition. These 2 things are equivalent. What's your problem?

It is tempting to give in and allow your teen to have less food; so that she 'feels' better. You may think "At least she is having something... that's better than before."

However, when you reduce the content of the meal plan, it prolongs the Anorexia and your child's distress. Negotiations about how much will be eaten cause your child to continue to negotiate to lessen her guilt about eating. This leads to further frustration and conflict with parents, and added anxiety and distress for the teen.

Changing food in the meal plan

We don't recommend that a food be changed in a meal plan, unless it is replaced with another from the same food group. It is important that your teen gets foods from all the food groups, including "Others" (fats) in balance. Taking out whole or parts of food groups will lead to a deficiency – a diet that is missing the essential nutrients found in that food group.

Combination foods

You may wonder if it is possible to have foods like lasagna, stews or casseroles while you are using a meal plan. Having these foods is fine; it just takes a little thought. The ingredients are counted just like you would count separate foods.

For example, lasagna contains pasta, cheese, meat and tomato sauce.

- each ½ cup of pasta = 1 grain
- each 50g of cheese (about ½ cup, shredded) = 1 dairy
- each 3 ounces of meat = 1 protein
- each ½ cup of tomato sauce = 1 vegetable

Estimate the amount of each ingredient in your child's serving and relate this to the meal plan. It is OK to estimate – but it should be the adults in charge of the portion size. Some families use the portion that mom or dad have as a guide.

Variety

Parents are often concerned that their child is not getting a variety of foods. For example, the only meat a teen eats is chicken. It is best that your teen eats a variety of food; however, it is important to focus on one problem at a time. The most important thing now is that your child is eating enough nutrition. As long as your teen is getting foods from all the food groups (which the meal plan will ensure) then lack of variety is OK for the time being. Variety will come when your teen is ready.

Portion sizes

Parents and teens often argue about portions. The teen may feel that the portion is too large and the parents feel it is too small. Teens with eating disorders are usually unable to accurately estimate portion sizes.

When your teen first starts using a meal plan, it is best for you to put out the portion of food. This can change when your teen is able to be more independent at meal and snack times.

Here are some easy ways to estimate portion sizes

1 teaspoon looks like a penny

1 tablespoon looks like a ping-pong ball

1 grain:

- ½ cup of rice looks like half a baseball
- ½ a bagel looks like a hockey puck

1 fruit or vegetable:

- a medium piece of fresh fruit looks like a baseball
- ¼ cup of dried fruit looks like a golf ball
- ½ cup of vegetables looks like half a baseball
- 1 medium potato looks like a computer mouse

1 meat or alternative:

- 3 ounces of meat looks like a deck of cards or the palm of an adult's hand
- ½ cup beans looks like half a baseball
- 1/3 cup of nuts looks like a cupped palm of an adult's hand

1 milk product

- 50g of cheese looks like 3 dominoes

Preparing special meals

As you may have already discovered, there is no perfect food. You can simplify meal planning by continuing to make the meals that are normal for your family. While your teen should have some choice as to what she would like to eat, parents should be in charge of preparing the meals.

Liquid supplements

Most families find it helpful to have a liquid supplement such as Boost[®] or Ensure[®] on hand at home. Some teens find eating all of their nutrition through food alone too difficult, and choose to include a supplement when they begin to increase their nutrition. Supplements also provide parents and teens with a quick alternative to a planned snack at times when this is too challenging for emotional or practical reasons. Many teens find having Ensure[®], in a water bottle at school, an easy way to have their morning snack – as it is portable, private and acceptable to drink it in front of others and in class.

Every little bit counts

It is important that all the food in the meal plan is eaten. Meal plans usually fall apart not because whole meals are missed, but because corners are cut over and over again. Teens will often take less milk or juice or leave the “others” out of their meal plan. These changes seem small, but can add up to a lot of energy. This can prevent weight gain or cause weight loss.

A problem that often arises is that parents are unsure if their teen has had all the food in their meal plan. Parents can become confused and uncertain whether to trust their judgment or their child’s word that they have completed their nutrition. This can result in unnecessary conflict.

What should I do if my teen feels full or nauseated, or has stomach pain?

When teens first start on a meal plan, they may complain of feeling full after having eaten a small amount of food. They may also feel nauseated or have stomach pain. This can happen because it takes longer than normal for these teens to digest their food. Their digestion has slowed down, which is a natural response to a period of starvation. It is also possible that making eating changes is causing psychological discomfort, which is felt as an upset stomach.

The good news is that you can reassure your teen that these feelings are temporary. The problem can be easily fixed – by eating the recommended amount of food throughout the day. However, it can take up to a few weeks for the digestive tract to start working normally again.

To ease stomach upset, your teen may find it helpful to put a heating pad or hot water bottle on her stomach after eating. If she or he is allowed activity, a slow stroll 30 to 60 minutes after eating may be helpful. Many teens find being distracted with board games, conversation or using the computer helpful for redirecting their thoughts during this time.

You can be empathetic to your teen’s feelings, but it is important that you remain firm about her nutrition needs and meal plan.

How do I handle my teen's concerns about being supervised while eating?

Many teens do not like to be watched while they are eating because they say it makes them feel “weird” or self-conscious. Most teens tell us that what helps most is other people eating the same or similar foods with them. It feels more natural and social to eat when others are eating.

It is important to try to have normal conversation during meals and not openly focus on what your teen is eating. Now and then, you may need to prompt your teen to continue to eat or to finish in a timely manner. Many parents and their teens work out an unspoken system of relaying these message (what teens call “the look”). If this doesn't work, make your request calmly and directly. For example: “please take normal size bites”. You can gently label your child's distress in completing the meal and change the conversation to the diversional activity planned after the meal. See the information sheet about diversional activities or speak with your family therapist for specific ideas.

Remind your teen that the strength of their Anorexia makes is necessary for you to supervise their meals temporarily. Once he or she is able to regain and maintain their lost weight, you will have a much smaller role to play.

What if we need help?

If you face a difficult situation or need more help with the meal plan, please call Ingrid Toombs, the team dietitian at 905-521-2100, ext. 73199 or e-mail toombs@hhsc.ca.