

# Nutrition Foundations for Teenagers

**BUILDING  
HEALTHY  
HABITS  
FOR LIFE**



***Dr. Carla Pontes***



# Introduction

## *Hello! Welcome to this eBook.*

I'm Dr. Carla Pontes, an integrative health coach and researcher with a Ph.D. in health science. My 15-year-old son was the inspiration for this eBook, which is based on our real-life family experiences exploring ways to enjoy homemade meals and ensure maximum nutrient intake.

Adolescence brings unique challenges, and creating a foundation for healthy living at this stage of life can be tricky in a society where unhealthy foods are predominant. While getting children to do what their parents tell them is possible, tweens and teens often feel inclined to go against it. Hence, the “eat what I tell you to” approach that might have worked once is typically no longer viable.

A well-nourished body supports physical development and growth, and emotional resilience. On the other hand, excessive intake of processed and sugary foods is detrimental to health and well-being. Processed foods' preservatives, colorants, and flavor enhancers make them highly palatable and addictive. Consequently, kids, teenagers, and adults get easily hooked on these foods. They might never learn to enjoy them if they are not exposed enough to natural, real foods.

Deliberately featuring a child on the cover serves as a powerful visual metaphor, emphasizing the critical importance of fostering wholesome eating habits right from the early years, ideally preceding adolescence.

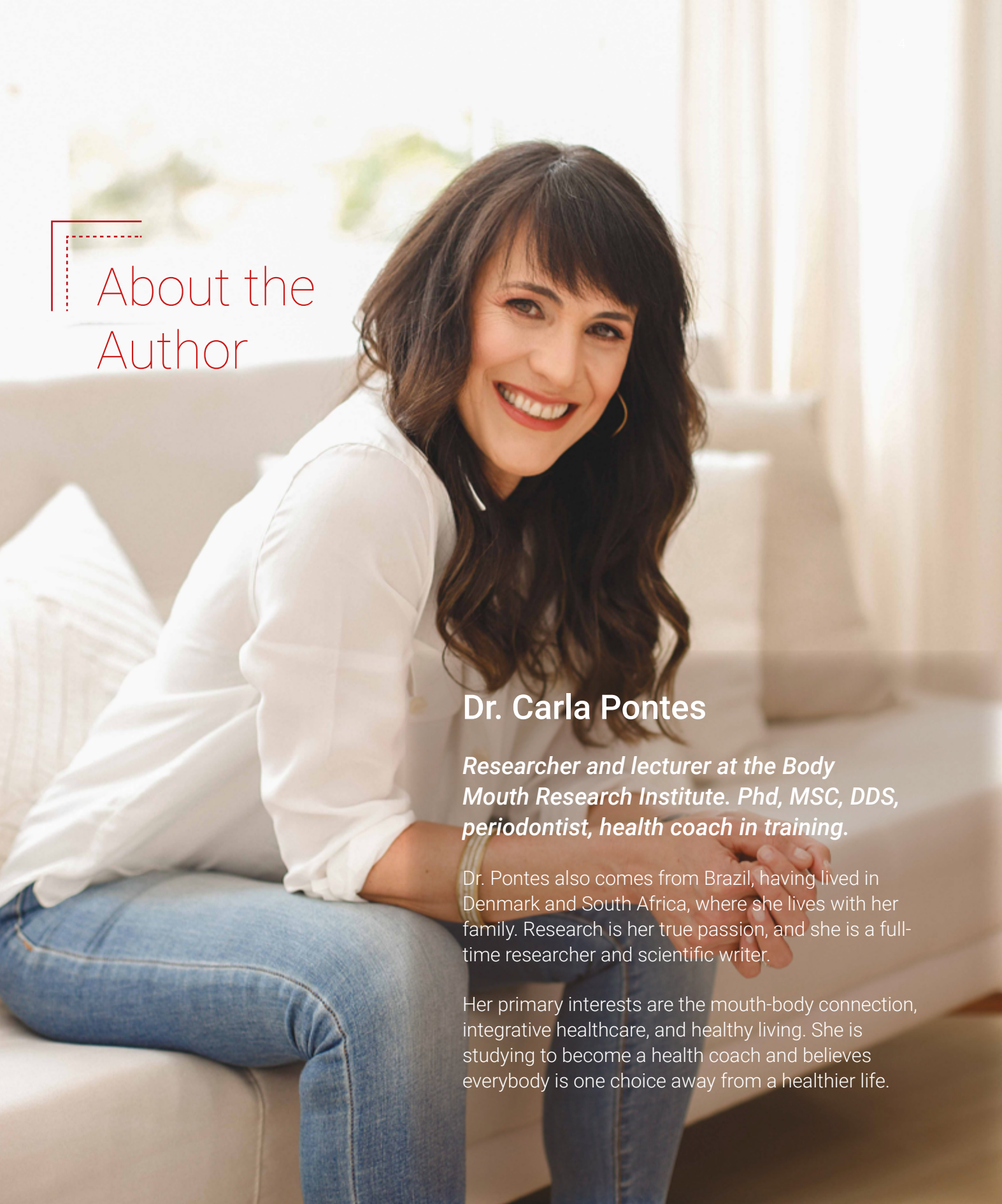
This ebook summarizes my attempts to give my teenage son a well-being foundation for the rest of his life. It focuses on sharing foundational information, tools, and inspiration to guide teens' nutritional choices. The idea is to get their tastebuds used to natural foods. Let's delve into critical nutrition principles for parents and teenagers to promote optimal health and vitality.



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## About the Author

### Dr. Carla Pontes

*Researcher and lecturer at the Body Mouth Research Institute. Phd, MSC, DDS, periodontist, health coach in training.*

Dr. Pontes also comes from Brazil, having lived in Denmark and South Africa, where she lives with her family. Research is her true passion, and she is a full-time researcher and scientific writer.

Her primary interests are the mouth-body connection, integrative healthcare, and healthy living. She is studying to become a health coach and believes everybody is one choice away from a healthier life.



# Building healthy habits for life during **teenagehood**

*The teenage years mark a critical period of physical, emotional, and mental growth. During this time, nutrition is vital in supporting the body's changing needs and ensuring overall well-being.*

*As teenagers navigate academic, social, and physical challenges, establishing healthy eating habits becomes essential for well-being and a lifetime of wellness.*

## **Nutrition for optimal growth and development**

Proper nutrition plays a pivotal role in fostering optimal growth and development during the critical phase of childhood and adolescence. As young bodies can grow rapidly, the nutrients from a balanced diet lay the foundation for physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being. Essential nutrients, such as proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, and minerals,



- **Whole Grains:** Choose whole grains over refined grains for sustained energy and better nutrient content. Options like whole wheat bread, brown rice, quinoa, and oats are excellent choices.
- **Proteins:** Include lean protein sources such as poultry, fish, beans, lentils, chickpeas, and nuts. Protein is crucial for muscle development, hormone production, and immune function.
- **Healthy Fats:** Incorporate sources of healthy fats like avocados, nuts, seeds, and olive oil. These fats support brain health and hormonal balance.

## Hydration: water, the unsung hero

Staying adequately hydrated is often overlooked but is a fundamental aspect of teenage nutrition. Water is vital for numerous bodily functions, including digestion, circulation, temperature regulation, and cognitive performance.

Encourage teenagers to drink water throughout the day, especially during physical activities. Limiting sugary beverages like sodas and fruit juices is vital to prevent excess calorie intake and maintain stable energy levels.



## Mindful Eating and portion control

Teenagers are frequently exposed to fast food, processed snacks, and large portions, so teaching them mindful eating and portion control is crucial. Please encourage them to listen to their body's hunger and fullness cues and avoid eating out of boredom or stress. Avoiding distractions while eating, such as smartphones or TV, and chewing slowly and thoroughly can help teenagers connect with their body's signals and prevent overeating.





## Snacking with purpose

Healthy snacking can be an integral part of a teenager's nutrition routine, as it can help maintain energy levels and prevent excessive hunger that may lead to overeating later. Opt for nutrient-dense snacks such as sugar-free full-fat yogurt, fruits, nuts, whole-grain crackers, and cut-up vegetables.

When choosing bread, the most gut-friendly is sourdough bread. Rye bread, whole-wheat, seed-rich, and fresh bread are better than packaged bread.

Limit consumption of sugary snacks and processed foods, which can lead to energy crashes and contribute to unhealthy weight gain, allergies, inflammation, gut and skin issues.

## Breakfast: the energizing start

Teenagers often rush through mornings due to school or other activities, but skipping breakfast is not ideal. A balanced breakfast provides the energy and nutrients needed to kick-start the day. Include protein, whole grains, and healthy fats to stabilize energy levels throughout the morning. Options like overnight or cooked rolled oats, sugar-free full-fat yogurt with fruits, nuts, and low-sugar muesli or granola, sourdough toast with eggs, nutritious smoothies, and whole-grain sugar-free cereal with milk are a few options.

## Understanding special dietary needs

Some teenagers might have special dietary needs due to allergies, intolerances, or health conditions.





If your teenager requires a specific diet, consult a registered dietitian or healthcare professional to ensure they receive proper guidance and support in meeting their nutritional requirements.

## The role of parents and role models

Parents and guardians play a vital role in shaping teenagers' eating habits. Set a positive example by making nutritious choices yourself and involving teenagers in meal planning and preparation. Encourage open conversations about food, body image, and healthy habits, focusing on fostering a healthy relationship with food and a positive self-image.



## General principles around nutrition for teenagers

Here are 10 principles for optimal nutrition during adolescence to promote health and well-being:

- **Balanced Diet:** Consume a well-rounded diet that includes a variety of nutrient-rich foods, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, and proteins. Include hidden vegetables in regular dishes as much as possible. Minced garlic, onion, leeks, chopped coriander, chives, and parsley can be added to almost any cooked food. Stimulate daily consumption of different fruits and vegetables for optimal nutrients, growth, and development. I always make a small side salad with the vegetables in my fridge seasoned with lemon, salt, and olive oil for main meals.
- **Adequate Fuel:** Food is the fuel that keeps cells and organs functioning optimally. Poor quality fuel (sugar, processed foods, for instance) causes poor body function, affecting growth, development, energy levels, and overall well-being.

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- **Hydration:** Drink plenty of water throughout the day, especially as teenagers are often active and may have increased fluid needs. Water is required for optimal cellular and organ function. Avoid having fizzy and sugary drinks in your fridge to promote water consumption.
  - **Calcium and Vitamin D:** Support bone health by consuming calcium-rich foods (leafy greens, fortified foods) and ensuring adequate vitamin D intake through sunlight exposure and dietary sources.
  - **Iron-rich foods:** Include iron-rich foods like lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, and lentils to prevent iron deficiency anemia.
  - **Limit Added Sugars and processed foods:** Minimize consumption of sugary drinks, snacks, and desserts to prevent excessive calorie intake and support overall health. Sugary foods should be limited so teenagers can get used to the taste of naturally sweetened foods, such as fruits. Otherwise, if they overeat sugary foods, their taste buds get used to the overly sweet taste, and nothing natural will taste as good. Excess sugar and processed foods can cause havoc in the gut microbiome and metabolism, contributing to chronic inflammation. Sugar substitutes should be avoided as most are harmful to the gut.
  - **Healthy Fats:** Choose healthy fats like avocados, nuts, seeds, and fatty fish while limiting saturated and trans fats in fried foods and processed snacks.
  - **Regular Meals and Snacks:** Eat nutritious meals and snacks to maintain steady energy levels and prevent excessive hunger.
  - **Mindful Eating:** Pay attention to hunger and fullness cues, and practice mindful eating to foster a healthy relationship with food.
  - **Low Caffeine Intake:** Excessive caffeine intake, especially when accompanied by insufficient calcium intake, can affect bone health during a crucial period of growth and contribute to poor sleep and anxiety.

Individual nutritional needs can vary, so consulting with a healthcare professional or registered dietitian for personalized guidance can be beneficial. These principles can serve as a foundation for making informed choices that promote optimal health and well-being during adolescence.

# Simple meals for **everyday life**

*I have included a few staple recipes I use regularly below for the weekdays that seem too busy and short. My idea is to quickly prepare natural meals and add many phytochemicals through fresh or dried spices. **TB spoon** = Tablespoon.*

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## **Vegetable loaded mince with potato mash**

- 500g ostrich mince (or good-quality beef mince)
- 2 garlic bulbs minced
- 1 small onion minced
- 1 leek minced
- 1 small carrot grated
- ½ cup frozen green peas
- 2 TB spoons tomato paste
- ½ cup shredded spinach leaves
- Salt/pepper to taste





- *1/3 teaspoon of the spices: turmeric, dried parsley, dried coriander, paprika*
- *1 TB spoon of nutritional yeast*
- *1 TB olive oil*

Sautee the garlic, onion, and leek for 5 minutes in olive oil on medium heat. Add the other vegetables, spices, meat, and tomato paste and saute until the meat is cooked. Add ½ cup of water and let it simmer for 15 minutes on low heat. Serve with potato mash and a small side rocket, tomato, and cucumber salad.



### ***Vegetarian one-pan dinner***

- *1 cooked carrot, diced*
- *½ cup frozen corn*
- *1 can of chickpeas*
- *1 medium cooked sweet potato, diced*
- *Few broccoli florets cut 45 minutes before cooking for optimal phytochemicals.*
- *1 TB olive oil*
- *1 cooked egg*

Place the vegetables and chickpea separately in a skillet pan and heat it with olive oil on medium heat for about 7 minutes until the corn is defrosted and hot. Add the cooked egg and serve.

### ***Pesto pasta with broccoli***

- *Wholewheat or gluten-free pasta of choice*
- *3 TB green pesto of choice (green or red)*
- *Few broccoli florets cut 45 minutes before cooking for optimal phytochemicals.*

Cook the pasta according to the manufacturer's instructions and drain. Add the pesto and the broccoli to the pasta in low heat for 5 minutes. Serve with a small side salad.



## **Coconut turmeric chicken fillets with rice**

- 4 chicken breasts cut into small fillers
- salt and pepper
- 1 TB olive oil
- 1/2 can of coconut cream
- Chives, chopped
- 2 Spring onions, chopped
- 1/2 tsp coriander powder
- 1/2 tsp turmeric
- 1/2 tsp paprika
- 1 Tsp minced garlic
- Juice of half a lemon



Season the chicken with salt and pepper, garlic, and olive oil, and cook for about 12 minutes on medium heat. Add the rest of the ingredients, and let it simmer for another 10 minutes on low heat. Serve with rice and a small side salad.



## **Blueberry peanut butter smoothie**

A smoothie can be a great ally in increasing fruit and vegetable intake.

- 1 banana
- 1 TB spoon of peanut butter (with no added sugar or salt)
- 1 TB spoon seed mix (flax, chia, sesame, and pumpkin seeds)
- ½ cup blueberries (fresh or frozen)
- 1 cup plant-based milk
- ½ TB spoon of green protein powder of choice (optional)

Blend everything until smooth.

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## Vanilla and chia seeds smoothie

- 1 banana
- 1 teaspoon of vanilla essence
- 1 cup plant-based milk
- 2 TB spoons of almonds or cashew nuts
- 1 TB spoon of pumpkin seeds
- 1 TB chia seeds

Blend everything until smooth.



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## Chocolate bate balls

- 2 cups pitted dates
- 1 tablespoon coconut sugar or honey (can be omitted)
- ½ cup raw pecans
- ½ cup raw cashews
- 2 tablespoons cocoa powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons almond butter
- 1 tablespoon unsweetened almond milk
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- Shredded coconut (for rolling)

In a blender, pulse the dates until finely chopped, and do the same with the nuts. Add all ingredients to the dates and nuts to form a sticky dough. Roll the balls in coconut.



## Healthy food swaps

Replace these:	With these:
<i>White packaged bread</i>	<i>Fresh, sourdough, rye, wholewheat bread.</i>
<i>Cereal</i>	<i>Rolled oats cooked or prepared overnight.</i>
<i>Sugar</i>	<i>A bit of raw honey (can also help with hay fever) or date caramel.</i>
<i>Whole fruits/vegetables</i>	<i>Chopp fruits and vegetables for higher polyphenol content, making it more convenient and attractive.</i>
<i>Sweets between meals</i>	<i>Sweets in moderation after meals for lower blood sugar spike.</i>
<i>Eat the same everyday</i>	<i>Add variety for tastebuds and to offer the gut different polyphenols.</i>
<i>Products with added sugar</i>	<i>Products with no added sugar, such as peanut butter, yogurt, etc.</i>
<i>Processed foods</i>	<i>Home made foods from real ingredients.</i>
<i>Tasteless foods</i>	<i>Use lots of fresh and dried herbs to spice up foods - they also have polyphenols: paprika, smoked paprika, turmeric, cayenne pepper, coriander, parsley, thyme, rosemary, basil.</i>
<i>Lettuce salad</i>	<i>Use dark leafy greens such as spinach, rocket, and watercress instead, as they are more nutritious.</i>
<i>Breakfast loaded with sugar and white flour</i>	<i>Savory breakfast rich in protein and fiber to decrease blood sugar spikes and improve focus and concentration at school.</i>
<i>Store-bough desert</i>	<i>Homemade healthy deserts with lower sugar content without colorants, preservatives, emulsifiers and flavor enhancers.</i>
<i>Fizzy and sports drinks</i>	<i>Lemon juice + sparkling water + bit of honey, homemade ice tea + sparkling water, kombucha without alcohol + sparkling water.</i>

## Practical eating habits tips for parents

Be the example: Your most potent contribution to your teens' and kids' eating habits is your example. The "do what I say, not what I do approach" will likely fail, while setting a good example will undoubtedly contribute.

- **Never give up:** Teenagers and children can learn new habits and change preferences quickly regarding food. Insist that they at least try fresh, natural, healthy foods as often as possible. If today they try something new and dislike it, next week they might start enjoying it.
- **Add color and variety daily:** Various natural foods colors are essential as different colors represent different polyphenols, which are magic health-promoting components. For adults, eating at least 30 different natural foods a week (including vegetables, fruits, legumes, grains, seeds, and nuts) has been linked to a lower risk of chronic disease and longevity.
- **Talk about nutrition:** Teenagers' brains are like sponges, absorbing everything around them. Take every opportunity to 'casually' talk about the content of foods and nutrients and their benefits for our health.
- **Don't judge:** There will be many times when your teen will eat nutrient-poor foods, particularly when attending parties, going out, or eating at school. Sometimes, there are simply no healthy choices available, and other times, they want highly palatable foods (due to preservatives, colorants, and flavor enhancers). It is all okay if they are exposed to natural foods at home. Hopefully, as they grow up, they will make better choices.



## Conclusions

*The teenage years are a pivotal time for establishing lifelong eating habits. By emphasizing balanced meals, natural foods created by nature, staying hydrated, practicing mindful eating, making purposeful snacks, and starting the day with a nutritious breakfast, teenagers can lay a strong foundation for their health and well-being.*

Remember that small changes can significantly improve overall health, and with guidance and support from parents and caregivers, teenagers can navigate their nutritional journey with confidence and vitality.







*Learn  
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Creating a healthier  
world is a revolutionary  
act, one you can start  
right now.

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Mark Hyman