



HSE HEALTH PROMOTION & IMPROVEMENT
HEALTHY HABITS
PARENTS | POST PRIMARY SCHOOL
CORK KERRY COMMUNITY HEALTHCARE

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A guide for parents* on key health messages for teenagers

Parents* have a huge influence in guiding teenagers to make positive health choices. It is amazing and rewarding to watch your teenager grow up and to help them learn to be independent. This guide contains information on physical and mental health, including the importance of relaxation and down time, a balanced diet, adequate sleep, vaping and being sunsmart. Good communication, problem solving skills and self-esteem in teenagers all promote wellbeing by enabling your teenager to express their needs and make healthy personal choices.

It can often be difficult to know which health messages are correct and which sources of health information are reliable and trustworthy. This guide provides you with the most up-to-date Irish health guidelines for teenagers, issued by the HSE and other Irish government agencies.

“It’s so hard to know what information is correct and up to date, it’s always changing and there is lots of misinformation”
Confused Parent!



*refers to parents/guardians/carers throughout



KEEPING ACTIVE

Vital for Physical & Mental Wellbeing

Being physically active is a core component of good health and wellbeing. Physical activity is essential for physical, psychological, emotional, and social health, and should be seen as part of everyone's daily lifestyle.

Research tells us that teenagers (particularly teenage girls) can lose interest in physical activity. Between school, homework, social activities and even part-time jobs, they are juggling a lot of interests and responsibilities.

By supporting and encouraging teenagers to take part in regular physical activity we can help them to develop good habits, which will prove invaluable throughout the rest of their lives.

The National Guidelines on Physical Activity for Ireland recommend that children and young people (up to 18 years) should be active at a moderate to vigorous intensity* **for at least 60 minutes a day every day**. This should include muscle-strengthening, flexibility and bone-strengthening exercises three times a week. 60 minutes a day can be accumulated by doing a number of shorter sessions during the day.

RESOURCES



- Tips on how to improve young people's activity levels [hse.ie](https://www.hse.ie)
- The START campaign aims to support families to take small steps to eating healthier food and becoming more active [safefood.net](https://www.safefood.net)
- HSE Physical Activity Guidelines [hse.ie](https://www.hse.ie)

* *follow the link above for more information on "moderate and vigorous intensity".*



Key Points for Parents

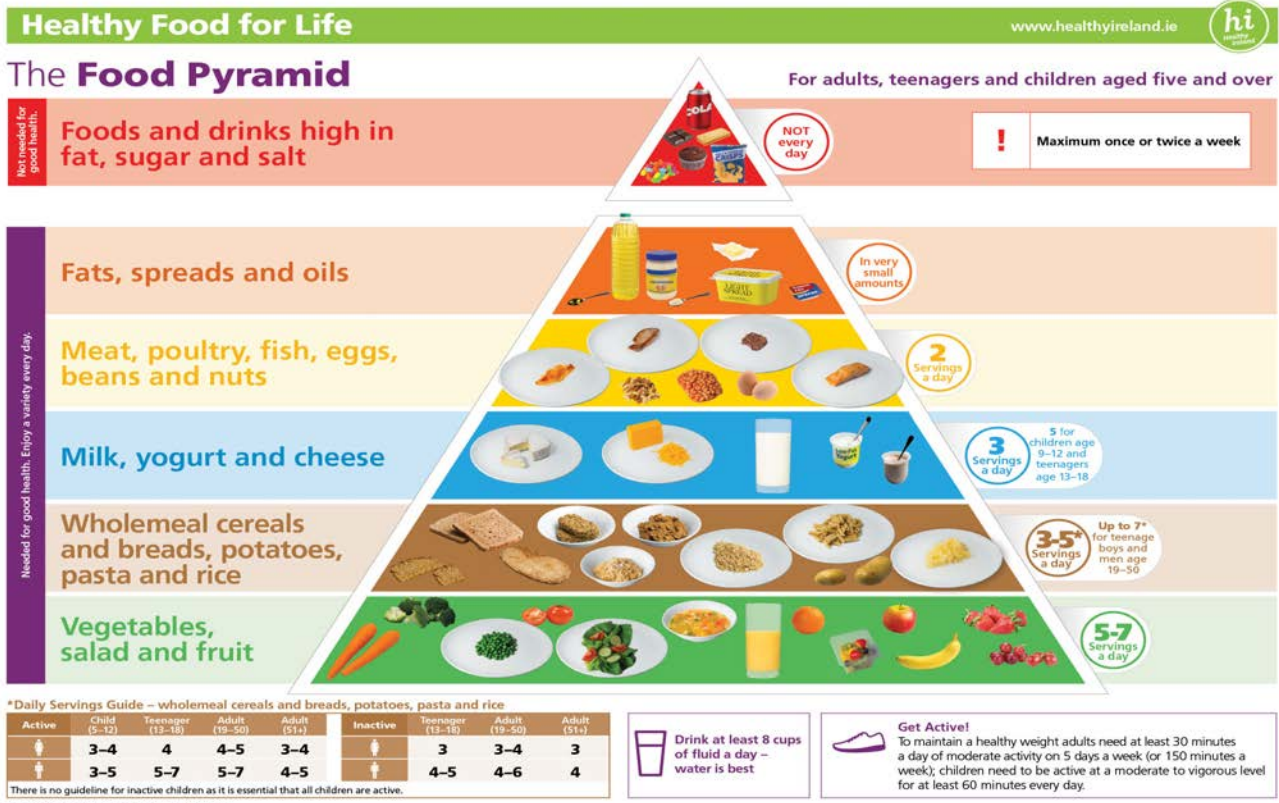


- Being active does not have to be organised or structured 'Sport'. All physical activity counts towards the 60 minutes activity per day.
- Encourage your teenager to get active through active recreation, such as hiking or skateboarding, walking, running, cycling or swimming.
- Join in the fun and be active with your teenager. This will also help you get your own daily recommended 30 minutes activity on at least 5 days a week or 150 minutes a week for adults.
- Parents should give teenagers control over how they decide to be physically active. They want to make their own decisions, so give them a choice. What they do is not important, they just need to be active.



EATING WELL

For adults, teenagers and children aged five and over



Healthy eating is about getting the correct amount of nutrients – protein, fat, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals that are needed to maintain both good health and a healthy weight. In order to help with food choices, the food pyramid guide is used. Foods that contain the same type of nutrients are grouped together on each of the shelves of the pyramid. Following the daily recommended servings will guide you towards the right balance of nutritious foods. While the food pyramid can be used as a guide, it is important that teenagers eat according to their growth rate and physical activity levels.

Teenagers begin to make their own choices about food and parents have less influence on what they eat, so promoting a positive body image is important as well. The following page has information on how healthy eating supports healthy teeth.

RESOURCES



- Your Guide to Healthy Eating hse.ie
- Nutrition information for teenagers safefood.net
- Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute. Nutrition information for teenagers indi.ie
- [Promoting positive body image](#)

Key Points for Parents

- Teenagers need extra energy. This varies depending on activity levels and gender. Extra energy can be provided by additional servings from the bread, cereals, potatoes, rice and pasta foods.
- Be sure your teenager is getting enough fruit, vegetables and salad to help satisfy their appetite - these provide lots of vitamins for good health.
- Eating enough calcium rich foods is very important, with the rapid growth during these years, this is a "once off" opportunity to build strong bones. From 9-18 years, 5 servings of milk, yoghurt and cheese are recommended. These foods are ideal as healthy snacks.
- Iron is a very important nutrient for teenagers especially girls. Iron is found in red meats (beef, lamb and pork), dark meat of poultry, eggs and foods fortified with iron, e.g. cereals.

DENTAL HEALTH

Everyone smiles in the same language! Talk to your teenagers to encourage healthy dental health and avoid problems like tooth decay, tooth wear, gum disease and bad breath with great oral hygiene and a healthy diet.

Key points for Parents

Discuss the following with your teenager for healthy teeth for life:

- For fresh breath make a habit of brushing your teeth and be aware of what you eat and drink.
- Always brush twice a day, at bedtime and one other time for 2- 3 minutes using a soft/medium toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste and change your toothbrush when the bristles are worn. Visit the family dentist for regular dental check ups.
- Do not rinse mouth after brushing to keep the fluoride in the mouth and on the teeth, just spit out the toothpaste.
- Do not skip flossing! Floss daily and especially if you wear braces, brush thoroughly every time you eat. It's a good idea to bring a travel toothbrush to school.
- Mouth and tongue piercings can lead to infections, chipped and cracked teeth and damaged gums.
- Sports and your dental health - playing sports can be a great way to make new friends, have fun and of course get some exercise! Always wear a mouthguard when playing sports (especially contact sports) on and off the pitch, to help reduce the risk of dental injuries, e.g. a fractured, cracked or knocked out tooth.

RESOURCES

- General dental health-Dental Health Foundation dentalhealth.ie
- Braces Information dentalhealth.ie
- [What to do to save that tooth](#)



HEALTHY EATING AND HEALTHY TEETH

- Follow a healthy diet as outlined in the healthy eating section
- Choose low sugar (less than 5g/100g) healthy snacks and drinks between meals
- Unflavoured milk and water are the best drinks. Milk will aid muscle recovery after exercise.
- Avoid high sugar sports drinks and limit carbonated drinks, even sparkling water, as it can lead to enamel erosion of teeth.
- Limit pure unsweetened fruit juice or fruit smoothies to a small glass once a day, with a meal.
- Braces - If you wear braces, make time to keep your teeth and braces clean, brushing thoroughly every time you eat.

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

SEXUAL WELLBEING

Sexual wellbeing is defined as a good balance of emotional, physical and social wellness in relation to sexual health and is linked to your overall general health. Children and teenagers experience many physical and emotional changes during puberty.

As your child enters the teenage years and puberty, they start to use other sources of information, such as their friends and the internet for answers to sensitive topics. Children are exposed to the topics of relationships and sexual wellbeing through the internet, gaming, magazines, music, videos and TV, often getting inappropriate and misleading information.

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is taught throughout their whole school life as part of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). It is important, that your teenager knows that they can also come to YOU whenever they have questions. They should feel comfortable talking to you, as their parent/guardian, regardless of the topic. Feeling heard and respected is so important for them.



RESOURCES

- There are a wide range of publications on www2.hse.ie/services/healthpromotion (under the search publications tool bar) on relationships and sexual wellbeing.
- mysexualhealth.ie
- sexualwellbeing.ie
- b4udecide.ie



MENTAL WELLBEING

Promoting Positive Mental Health - As Important As Physical Health

Teenage years are a time of significant life transitions, physical changes, emotional and intellectual demands. Social media also becomes very much part of their lives at this stage and research shows that this can have a negative impact on their mental health. The changes that occur during this time can manifest in these behaviours that can be challenging and hard to understand, it can leave parents feeling unsure as to what is part of typical adolescent behaviour and what may cause more concern. Sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference.

As a parent you play an important role in supporting your teenager's mental health. You can promote good mental health by the things you do, say and the environment you create at home.

RESOURCES



- Mental Health and Young People. mentalhealthireland.ie
- spunout.ie
- hse.ie/mental-health
- Information on mental health support services for children. hse.ie
- jigsaw.ie



Key Points for Parents



- **Focus on strength:** Look at things that your child does well.
- **Ask questions about feelings:** It is OK for your child to feel how they feel (e.g. angry, sad, worried, embarrassed). The feelings can be mild, moderate, or strong. They are not right or wrong, good or bad. To help your child name and calm their feelings, ask questions about what they are feeling.
- **Listen and show empathy:** When your child tells you what they are feeling, try to put yourself in their place. Accept what they are feeling and show empathy with the tone of your voice and the expressions on your face.
- **Strong and loving relationships** can have a direct and positive influence on teenage mental health.
- **Physical health** is very much linked to mental health. Encourage teenagers to stay active, eat well, sleep well and avoid alcohol, cigarettes, e-cigarettes and other drugs.
- **Sleep** is proven to help memory and focus, as well as improve management of stress and anxiety.
- **Familiarise yourself** with what is happening in school around mental health and wellbeing and provide opportunities to discuss at home.

E-CIGARETTES / VAPING

Vaping is an emerging risk to the health of children and young people. While it is normal for young people to want to experiment with tobacco, e-cigarettes, alcohol or other drugs, the best thing we can do for our health is not to smoke or vape.

Unfortunately, vaping use in young people under the age of 18 has increased in recent years. Vaping liquids can contain high levels of nicotine. Young people who vape are more likely to start smoking cigarettes than those who never vape.

What are the risks of vaping?

We are still learning about the long-term health effects of vaping. Here is what we know now.

- You can become addicted to nicotine.
- Most e-cigarettes contain nicotine, which is highly addictive and leads to dependence.
- Nicotine can also train the brain to be more easily addicted to other drugs like cocaine.
- Children and young people are especially vulnerable to the effects of nicotine as their brains are still developing.
- Children and young people who vape are likely to become addicted to nicotine, develop mood disorders and find it hard to control their impulses.

The HSE does not recommend using e-cigarettes as a stop smoking aid. We advise anyone who wants to stop smoking to use evidence-based medications (medications that are safe and that we know can work well). An example of this is nicotine replacement therapy.

Worried about your child vaping?

If you or your child are worried about vaping you can contact the HSE stop smoking services at:

www.quit.ie

and search for stop smoking clinics or

FREephone 1800 201 203

The HSE recommends that young people do not vape.



Key Points for Parents ✓

Here are some suggestions for talking to young people about your concerns:

- Find the right moment, such as when you see someone vaping, walking past a vape shop or you see advertisements.
- Ask questions like: what do they think about vaping? Do they know people who vape? Are they vaping themselves? Why do they think people vape?
- Listen to them, learn from them, but also use what you know to help them understand the facts about vaping.
- Talk about the different reasons why young people may vape and give examples, such as wanting to fit in, curiosity, stress. Talk to them about how to respond if they ever feel pressured to try vaping and practise this together.
- Talk about your concerns and tell them why you don't want them to vape or smoke.

RESOURCES

- [Vaping and e-cigarettes A HSE information booklet for parents, guardians and young people](#)



DRUGS & ALCOHOL



Keeping Your Teenagers Safe

It is internationally recommended that children and young people should not drink alcohol or take drugs until early to mid twenties as their bodies and brains are still developing. However, in Ireland despite the legal age for alcohol use being 18 years, the average age for those who start to experiment with substances is around the age of 15 years.

It can be difficult for parents to prevent children from engaging in this activity. However, the longer that young people can delay drinking alcohol and drug use the less likely it is that problems will occur in later life. Teenagers and young people's attitudes to alcohol and other drugs are influenced by many things - friends, social media, advertising and, not least, the Irish drinking culture. Fortunately, in spite of these many influences, parents remain the **single strongest influence** on their child's substance use behaviours.

Key Points for Parents

- Build a close relationship with your teenager.
- Talk openly and honestly about the risks of using alcohol and other drugs.
- Set boundaries and stick to them.
- Know what they are doing when out.
- Do not give alcohol to under 18 year olds.
- If you drink set a good example by taking a low risk approach.
- Be aware of the schools substance use policy.

RESOURCES



- HSE Drug & Alcohol Helpline. This confidential service has both a Freephone Helpline (1800 459 459) and an email support service (helpline@hse.ie). drugs.ie
- HSE 'Alcohol and Drugs: A Parent's Guide' aimed at parents, guardians and others who care for children. Alcoholanddrugsaparentsguide.pdf
- Information for parents on drugs & alcohol. hse.ie
- Ask about alcohol.ie is a website dedicated to information on alcohol. askaboutalcohol.ie



SUNSMART

Most people living in Ireland have fair skin, the type which burns easily and tans poorly, so are at high risk of UV damage and skin cancer. Exposure to UV radiation during childhood is particularly harmful, so protecting skin is extremely important.

Encourage your teenager to be SunSmart – and be safe in the sun. [This poster](#) provides all the useful information.

KEY POINTS FOR PARENTS

Discuss the following with your teenager:

Protect your skin by following the SunSmart 5 Ss



Slip on clothing: Cover skin as much as possible, wear long sleeves, collared t-shirts, clothes made from close-woven material that does not allow sunlight through.



Slop on broad-spectrum (UVA/UVB) sunscreen: Apply sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30+ for adults and 50+ for children, which has high UVA protection, and is water resistant. Reapply regularly. No sunscreen can provide 100% protection, it should be used alongside other protective measures such as clothing and shade.



Slap on a wide brimmed hat: Protect your face, ears and neck.



Seek shade: Sit in cover of trees to avoid direct sunlight. Use a sunshade on your buggy or pram. Keep babies and children out of direct sunlight.



Slide on sunglasses: Guard your eyes from harm by wearing sunglasses with UV protection.



Do not deliberately try to get a suntan. Avoid getting a sunburn. Never use a sunbed.



Know the UV index: When the UV index is 3 or above you need to protect your skin. In Ireland, the UV index is usually 3 or above from April to September, even when it is cloudy. Stay safe by limiting time in the sun when UV is strongest, typically between the hours of 11:00am-3:00pm.



SUNBEDS

There is no safe way to use a sunbed. Keep skin colour natural. It is against the law to allow people under the age of 18 to use sunbeds. Teenagers' skin is more easily damaged by sunbeds. Teenagers who use sunbeds are much more likely to get melanoma, the most serious type of skin cancer when they are adults.



RESOURCES

- [Sunsmart](#)
- [Sunbeds](#)

SELF CARE FOR PARENTS Prioritise It!

As we raise our children and juggle everything else in our busy lives, we can forget to mind ourselves and self-care can become lower down the priority list.

Self-care allows us to check in with how we are feeling and look after ourselves. It should not be seen as a luxury but rather an essential part of our lives.

Self Care

Activities and practices that we deliberately plan and choose to engage in on a regular basis to enhance and maintain our wellbeing.



Key Points for Parents



- Good self-care is key to improved mood and reduced anxiety. It's also key to a good relationship with oneself and others.
- Getting Active - being physically active is beneficial for your physical and overall wellbeing. It can help you deal with anxiety and stress.
- Eating Well - healthy eating is really important to look after our general health and keep ourselves well. By nourishing our bodies and minds, we can develop a better connection between the food we eat and how we feel and positively impact our physical and mental wellbeing.
- Minding Your Mood - minding your mood and your mental wellbeing can allow you to enjoy activities you take part in, work productively, cope with normal stresses in life and realise your own potential.

RESOURCES



- [Minding Your Wellbeing](#). Five 20 minute video sessions.
- [The Five Ways to Wellbeing](#) are simple actions to practice each day to maintain or improve our mental health and wellbeing.
- Parenting Support - tusla.ie

The **FIVE WAYS TO WELLBEING** are simple actions to practice each day to maintain or improve our mental health and wellbeing



Give
Your time, your words, your presence

BE ACTIVE
DO WHAT YOU CAN, ENJOY WHAT YOU DO, MOVE YOUR MOOD

KEEP LEARNING
EMBRACE NEW EXPERIENCES, SEE OPPORTUNITIES, SURPRISE YOURSELF

CONNECT
TALK & LISTEN, BE THERE, FEEL CONNECTED

TAKE NOTICE
REMEMBER THE SIMPLE THINGS THAT GIVE YOU JOY



CONTACT DETAILS

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