



Mott Poll Report

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Helping Teens with Healthy Holiday Eating

As children become teens, they begin to make independent choices about what they eat. Parents play an important role in offering guidance and watching for problematic eating behavior. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of teens 13-17 years about healthy eating.

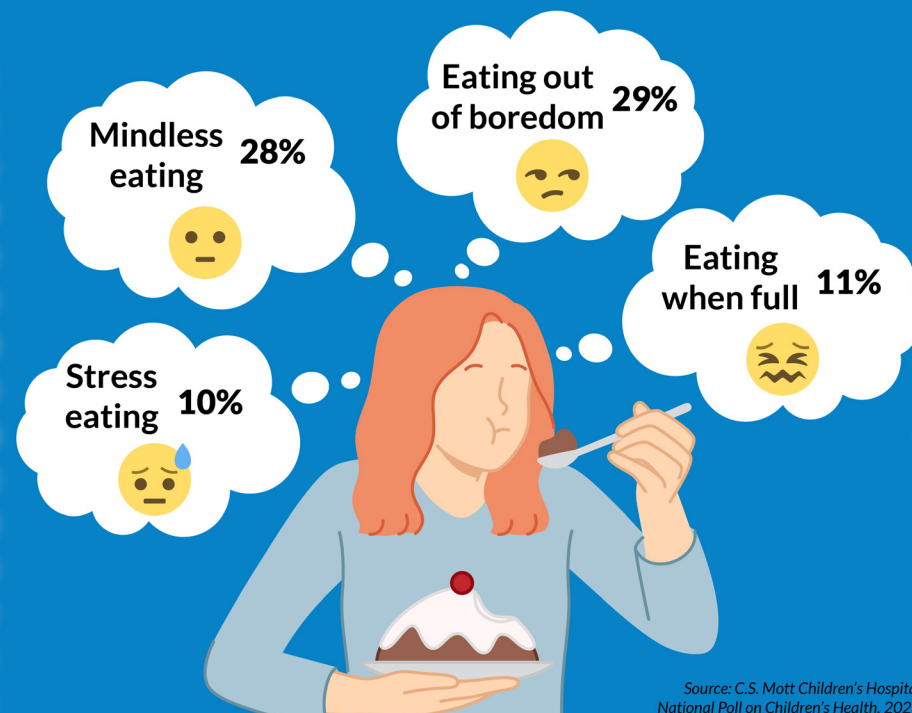
About half of parents (48%) say their teen's typical eating pattern involves three meals a day, 13% say their teen snacks throughout the day, 9% say their teen skips breakfast, and 30% say their teen has no typical eating pattern. While 46% of parents believe their teen eats a balanced diet, others feel their teen doesn't eat enough (30%) or eats too much (24%) of certain foods.

Two-thirds of parents (65%) describe their teen as about the right weight, while 21% think their teen is overweight and 14% underweight. Some parents report that their teen has habits associated with eating when not hungry, such as eating because they are bored (29%), mindless eating (28%), eating even after they are full (11%), and eating because they are stressed (10%). Parents who describe their teen as overweight are much more likely to report these eating behaviors.

Parents report hearing their teen talk about being too fat (14%), needing to diet or fast after eating a big meal (11%), or wanting to hide their body with baggy clothes (8%). Parents who describe their teen as overweight are much more likely to report hearing their teen express these thoughts. Thirty percent of parents feel it is difficult to talk with their teen about food and weight; this is more common among parents who describe their teen as overweight (55%) compared to right weight (22%) or underweight (31%).

On holidays or other occasions that feature big meals, some parents offer their teens specific advice to manage the event, such as exercise more to burn off the extra calories (10%), eat something healthy ahead of time to be less hungry at the event (8%), decide in advance what to eat or not eat (5%), choose low-calorie foods (2%), or fast the day after the event (1%). Other parents give general advice, such as eat in moderation (33%). Parents who describe their teen as overweight are more likely to report offering these suggestions.

Parent report of their teen's eating habits



Report Highlights

Only half of parents say their teen typically eats three meals a day.

1 in 3 parents say it is hard to talk with their teen about food and weight.

1 in 5 parents think their teen is overweight, while 1 in 7 say their teen is underweight.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in August 2025 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 1-17 years living in their household (n=2,029). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 66% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 970 parents with at least one child age 13-17. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ± 1 to 8 percentage points.

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Implications

Healthy eating is a key component for long-term health, and eating patterns formed in the child and teen years often remain into adulthood. When children are young, parents are the main influence on the child's diet, determining what foods are served. However, teens often take a more independent role in choosing their own foods and eating more meals outside of the home. As an example, only half of parents in this Mott Poll reported that their teen usually eats three meals a day.

A particular challenge is that many teens have a busy schedule of schoolwork, extracurricular activities, work or social events. When eating is "squeezed in" between activities, teens may reach for whatever food is most convenient; in many cases, this means ultra-processed foods or fast foods that are high in calories and low in nutritional content. A key role for parents is to make sure teens have healthy and convenient options, including "grab and go" items for teens to eat on the way to school or between activities. To support this, parents can involve teens in deciding which items to buy and showing them how to check nutrition labels to compare products.

For many families, large holiday meals are a key part of seasonal celebrations. These meals can be challenging, particularly when a family member is attempting to manage their weight. In this Mott Poll, one in seven parents described their teen as underweight, and one in five described their teen as overweight. Still, relatively few parents in this Mott Poll reported offering suggestions on how their teen might be proactive in approaching a large holiday meal, such as eating something healthy before so they aren't as tempted to eat large amounts of high-calorie foods. Other approaches include making sure that healthier options are included in the holiday menu, and limiting the amount of unnecessary calories offered through sugary beverages or high-calorie appetizers.

Many parents reported their teen engages in eating habits known to be problematic for maintaining a healthy weight, such as mindless eating, or eating when bored, stressed, or already full. This can be a particular problem around holidays when there may be more "treats" around and teens tend to have more free time to eat them. Parents can help to minimize the impact of teens snacking even when they are not hungry by limiting the amount of unhealthy foods readily available for excess consumption, replacing them with healthy snack options that are easily accessible; examples include having cut fruit or vegetables visible at the front of the fridge or popcorn portioned out in single-serving bags. Parents may also consider their own eating habits; in many cases, teens mirror the patterns they see in other family members.

Some parents in this Mott Poll have heard their teen make negative statements about themselves and their weight. This can be concerning for parents, as the images and messages that many teens consume through social media make them susceptible to developing a negative body image. It's important for parents to try to counteract these messages; however, many parents are uncomfortable talking with their teen about weight and eating habits, particularly if the teen is overweight or underweight. Parents may worry that these discussions could cause their teens to become more self-conscious or have lower self-esteem. At a developmental stage where teenagers express a strong need for independence, teens may not be open to taking advice from their parents. If parents feel that their teen has an unhealthy pattern of eating and/or a negative view of themselves related to their weight, it may be time to seek input from the teen's healthcare provider.