

Balanced Plate: Ages 12+

Adolescence brings the highest nutritional demands of childhood – protein peaks, bones are still building until age 25, and the gut-brain connection drives mood, focus, and hormonal balance.

50% colorful veggies & fruit – Non-starchy veg + all fruit – fiber and color

25–30% protein – Peaks during puberty growth spurts

10–15% carbs – Whole grains + starchy vegetables 10% healthy fats – Hormone production + heart health

Key nutrients during adolescence: Daily protein: 46–59g (girls / boys – higher during growth spurts) Daily calcium: 1,300mg (peak bone density – bones build until age 25) Iron (girls): 15mg/day (after menstruation onset – critical to address)

50% — VEGGIES, FRUIT & FIBER

Full variety, raw or cooked. Leafy greens (spinach, kale, arugula), cruciferous (broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts), colorful peppers, mushrooms, zucchini, tomatoes.

Fruit: berries, apples, citrus, kiwi – antioxidant and fiber rich.

Daily fiber: 25–31g.

Prebiotic picks: garlic, onion, asparagus, leeks, Jerusalem artichoke.

25–30% — PROTEIN

Protein needs peak during puberty. Include at every meal, especially breakfast and post-activity.

Chicken, eggs, salmon, sardines, ground turkey, lentils, chickpeas.

Dairy protein: full-fat Greek yogurt, cottage cheese, kefir – provide protein, calcium, and probiotics.

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10-15% — CARBS

Whole, minimally processed grains: oatmeal, quinoa, bulgur, whole grain pasta and bread.

Starchy veggies — sweet potato, corn — excellent post-workout carbs.

Minimize refined grains and added sugar.

10% — HEALTHY FATS

Essential for hormone production, cardiovascular health, and mood. Avocado, olive oil, salmon, walnuts, chia and flaxseed, eggs, full-fat yogurt.

Omega-3s support mood stability — especially relevant during adolescent hormonal shifts.

Aim for 3+ omega-3 servings per week.

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GUT-BOOSTING FOODS

Include something from each category daily – gut health drives mood, immunity, and focus.

- **Fiber-rich** – Beans, lentils, whole grains, leafy greens, seeds – wide variety feeds microbiome diversity
- **Colorful plants** – Each color = distinct phytonutrients converted by gut bacteria into neurotransmitters, vitamins, and anti-inflammatories
- **Fermented foods** – Greek yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi, miso, low-sugar kombucha – aim for at least one daily

DAIRY

Full-fat dairy is preferred: Greek yogurt and kefir count as both protein and fermented gut-supporting foods – two roles in one. Look for live cultures and minimal added sugar. Cottage cheese is high-protein and calcium-rich. For lactose-sensitive children, goat kefir or coconut yogurt with live cultures are gentler alternatives.

FUN FOODS

80/20 approach – progress, not perfection. Pizza, fries, desserts, and fast food can be enjoyed occasionally without guilt. The goal is building a healthy baseline and a positive relationship with food. Restriction and food shame in adolescence are independently linked to disordered eating. Focus on what to add, not just what to avoid.

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FOODS TO LIMIT OR AVOID

- **Artificial colors & flavors** — Linked to behavioral changes, gut dysbiosis, and systemic inflammation
- **Added sugar & sugary drinks** — Drives blood sugar instability, feeds harmful gut bacteria, contributes to acne and mood swings
- **Ultra-processed foods** — Low fiber and nutrient density during a high-demand growth period; displace whole foods
- **Refined seed oils** — High omega-6 content drives systemic inflammation — choose olive oil, avocado oil, or grass-fed butter
- **Artificial sweeteners** — know the difference: Evidence varies by type and is still emerging. Synthetic options (sucralose, aspartame, saccharin) have stronger associations with gut microbiome disruption. Natural options (stevia, monk fruit) are better studied but not risk-free. Across all types, the main concern for teens is reinforcing sweet taste dependency — habitual use can make it harder to recalibrate toward less sweetness. Occasional use is not a concern; daily reliance as a sugar substitute is worth being mindful about.
- **Emulsifiers & preservatives** — Polysorbate 80, carrageenan, and similar additives compromise gut lining and increase permeability
- **For girls after puberty onset:** Iron-rich foods are critical — lean red meat, lentils, spinach, pumpkin seeds, fortified cereals. Always pair with vitamin C sources (bell peppers, citrus, strawberries) to enhance iron absorption. Low iron is the most common nutritional deficiency in adolescent girls and directly affects energy, focus, and mood.