

Back to School, Back to Health Tips for a Healthy School Year

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By Jodi Fletcher

Summer is almost over and that means kids will be going back to school. Healthy kids are happy kids. There are some ways to ensure kids go back to school healthy and happy.

Yearly physical

Other than the occasional cold or flu, [children don't visit the doctor's office often](#). A yearly physical examination enables the doctor to assess a child's overall health. Back to school time is a perfect time to schedule these important screenings. The doctor will address important developmental concerns. They will also check the child's heart and lungs. They may suggest nutritional and physical activity plans, as well as offering advice for children entering adolescence.

Nutrition

Since kids spend six to eight hours at school, what they are eating is important. According to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) (AAP), children consume 35% to 40% of their daily calories during the school day. Starting the day with a nutritious breakfast that includes protein can help a child

focus better on their school activities. [Some schools do provide breakfast](#) for students. Not every child likes everything the school's cafeteria offers. Luckily most schools provide parents with daily menus, so if a child does not like what is offered on a given day, a packed lunch can be planned. Lunches should consist of heart-healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables and lean protein. Foods high in sodium should be avoided. Soft drinks should also be avoided due to the high level of sugar and calories, which increase the risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease. Water, juice, or low-fat dairy products offer a healthier alternative. Schools offer different payment options for lunches, including free lunches to those who qualify. Every child should get enough to eat during their time at school.



Physical activity

Kids do plenty of sitting during the school day. That is why it is important to incorporate some physical activities into their day. [According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), children should participate in a minimum of 60 minutes of physical activity every day. This physical activity decreases the risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease. Physical activity improves mental health, reducing stress and anxiety. The CDC breaks this recommendation down into three categories.

- Moderate to vigorous intensity aerobic activity should make up most of the 60 minutes every day, with vigorous

intensity activities 3 days per week.

- On a scale of 0-10, moderate intensity activities are 5-6 and cause the heart to beat faster than normal. Vigorous intensity activities are 7-8 and cause the heart to beat even faster.
- Muscle strengthening, such as gymnastics or push-ups, at least 3 days per week.
- Bone strengthening, such as running, at least 3 days per week.

During the school day, children can participate in physical education, recess, and other classroom activities. After school, they can join athletic groups, playgroups, or participate in their favorite physical activity.



Sleep

For many kids, summer is a time for staying up late and sleeping in. The days are longer and there is so much to do. However, as back to school approaches, kids need to get back into a better sleep schedule. Children who do not get enough sleep have a more difficult time concentrating and learning. Younger children need 10-12 hours of sleep, and getting up on time for school means getting to bed earlier than during the summer. [According to the National Sleep Foundation](#) and the [Harvard Health Publishing](#), adolescents who don't get enough sleep have an increased risk for higher cholesterol levels, higher body mass index, higher blood pressure, and

hypertension. Limiting evening activities will help a child shift to use that time to do homework and study. A shift towards a consistent bedtime and wake time should begin at least a week before the start of school. This shift should also include limiting screen time. [The AAP recommends](#) that all devices should be removed from a child's room at night and stop screen time at least one hour before bedtime.

Starting the new school year happy and healthy improves children's ability to focus and learn. For more information about how to help with a child's first day back to school [go here](#).