

# Families that eat well together, stay healthy together

Mom and Dad are often the first teachers of their children when it comes to words, letters and numbers. It's no different when it comes to health.

"Parents set the stage for the family," said Dr. Robert Blake, a neonatologist and a pediatrician at Pediatrics After Hours at St. Joseph Medical Center, Towson. Parents are role models for their children in exercise and eating habits.

"Be more active," said Dr. Blake, who recommends 30-45 minutes of activity every day or at least three times a week. Sports, walking and bike riding are all good ways for parents and children to get moving as a family, he said.

When it comes to forming good eating habits, Dr. Blake suggested preparing meals together and eating as a family, which can cut down on snacking.

Looking at the nutritional content also helps families pick out healthy foods.

"Be pretty cognizant about food labels," Dr. Blake said. "Just because they look good and they're attractive doesn't mean they're the best thing for them."

Dr. Blake suggests checking for sugar, salt and fat, as well as looking at the order in which the ingredients are listed.

It is a bad sign if sugar is in the top three, according to the doctor.

If that sweet tooth is just itching for cookies, those 100-calorie snack packs aren't the answer. The packs may be low in fat, but they still have sugar.

Heavy sugar intake can indirectly lead to cardiovascular disease, said Dr. Blake, who has seen adolescents with adult diseases such as Type 2 diabetes.

Dr. Blake advises someone with a sweet tooth to retrain his or her palate and get back to fruits. Since there is an abundance of fruit options, someone who dislikes bananas, for example, has plenty of alternatives.

When food shopping for the family, it's also important to look at the different types of fat listed on the food label. Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats are better than saturated or trans fats.

"You try to avoid hydrogenated oils as much as possible," Dr. Blake said of an ingredient that can signify the presence of trans fat.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, manufacturers may say an item has zero trans fat if the amount is less than half a gram.

"Whole foods are always the best way to go," Dr. Blake said. "Eat foods the way God prepared them."