Growing Healthy Bones: Nutrition and Activity

Young children grow at a rapid rate. A healthy diet and plenty of activity will help them grow to be strong and vigorous. The growth of healthy bones is important to a young child’s overall health. Strong bones are the framework for growing muscles; they protect the heart, lungs, brain and other organs from injury and they store vital minerals needed for the body’s healthy functioning.

Why is childhood an important time for bone development?
Developing good habits during childhood can lead to a lifetime of healthy bones. Bones are always being renewed and a good supply of nutrients is needed for this process. Patterns of regular exercise established in childhood are also important for bone health.

Can diet improve bone health?
Calcium is a mineral that is stored in bones. The body may use the calcium stored in bones for other activities such as heart, lung and nerve function. A diet that provides calcium is needed for a healthy body and for the development of healthy bones. Vitamin D is also important for growing bones. Most children will get enough vitamin D from sunlight and milk in their diet. Children who do not get regular sunlight exposure or drink milk may need vitamin D fortified foods or supplements. Exclusively breastfed infants should get vitamin D supplements starting in the first 2 months of life.

What foods are good sources of calcium?
In the United States, the most common source of dietary calcium is milk and other dairy products. This includes yogurt, cheese and ice cream. However, a variety of other foods are also good sources of calcium such as leafy greens, collards, turnip greens, bok choy, broccoli, almonds, soybeans, tofu, fish and shellfish. Many juices, cereals and breads are also fortified with calcium and vitamin D.

How does physical activity improve bone health?
Participating in weight bearing activities is the most important way to make bones denser and stronger. These are activities such as running, jumping, climbing and dancing. Swimming and riding bikes or trikes are fun and great exercise, but won’t lead to stronger bones. All exercise, however, will improve coordination, balance and muscle strength, making falls less likely and preventing breaks. Wearing helmets when biking or scootering can also protect growing bones from injury.

Encourage habits for bone health by being a good role model.
- Be physically active every day
- Maintain a healthy body weight throughout your life
- Show children that you eat a healthy diet that is rich in a variety of foods.