

# Salud America!

The RWJF Research Network to  
Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

Volume 3, Issue 4, Spring, 2010-11

## Inside This Issue

**Page 2:** Director's Corner,  
News & Funding

**Page 3:** Stepping Up  
Against Latino Childhood  
Obesity

**Page 4:** Grantee Corner

**Page 5:** Grantee Corner

**Page 6:** Research

**Page 7:** Policy & Built  
Environment Corner

**Page 8:** Kids' Health Corner

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E-newsletter.

## Tackling California Students' Low Fitness Levels with Community Action



Only a third of California students are physically fit, a statistic that alarms pediatricians, fitness experts and child advocates because of its implications for diminished student health and academic achievement.

According to the "Fitnessgram," an annual test that measures students' abilities in six fitness areas, most could not run a mile or do a few pushups, pull-ups and sit-ups, and most lacked a healthy body mass index—a measure of body fat based on height and weight. The Fitnessgram tests were given to approximately 1.32 million students in grades five, seven, and nine. Students needed to pass five of the six tests to be deemed physically fit.

"Nothing is more important than the health of our children, and today's results show that many of them need a helping hand to get fit and stay in

Continued on page 8 ►

*Salud America!*  
Grantee Dr.  
Rebecca London of  
Stanford University  
is examining the link  
between adolescents'  
participation in  
community-based  
after-school  
programming and  
their physical fitness  
and overweight status in the San  
Francisco area.



Rebecca  
London

Dr. London has presented some preliminary findings in a university issue **brief** and webinar on March 24, 2011.

In the brief and webinar, she indicated that students who regularly participated in after-school programs that focus on physical activity were 10 percent more likely to pass California's fitness tests. However, Latino students were less likely to participate and reap fitness benefits.

Find out more about Dr. London's *Salud America!* project [here](#).



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

**Salud America!** The RWJF Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The program aims to unite and increase the number of Latino scientists engaged in research on childhood obesity among Latinos to seek environmental and policy solutions to the epidemic. The network is directed by the Institute for Health Promotion Research at The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio. For more information, visit [www.salud-america.org](http://www.salud-america.org). The *Salud America!* E-newsletter is distributed quarterly to its national membership network.

## Director's Corner

### Letter to members from Dr. Amelie Ramirez

Given that nearly 75% of Latinos were overweight or obese in Texas as of 2009, it's important to highlight programs and research that are contributing knowledge of what works best to encourage healthier lifestyles among Latinos.



Amelie Ramirez

To that end, the San Antonio Life Sciences Institute (SALSI) sponsored a research forum focusing on Latino obesity on May 10, 2011. The forum showcased innovative strategies, programs and interventions from researchers and community leaders to reduce the Latino obesity epidemic in Texas.

The Institute for Health Promotion Research (IHPR) at The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio (UTHSCSA), the headquarters for *Salud America!*, coordinated the forum.

For those who were not able to attend, I invite you to watch the videos of the speakers:

#### VIDEO: UT San Antonio Researchers

- Dr. Zenong Yin on an early-childhood healthy lifestyles program in Latino daycares
- Dr. Meizi He on educating Latinos on healthy lifestyles via faith-based groups (Dr. He also is a *Salud America!* pilot investigator)
- Dr. Lesli Biediger-Friedman on the evaluation of San Antonio's restaurant recognition program for healthy menus
- Dr. Gayle Nicoll on architectural and environmental changes to enhance walkability and physical activity

#### VIDEO: UT Health Science Center at San Antonio Researchers:

- Dr. Deborah Parra-Medina on her "Be Fit with Friends" project that is testing an intervention to increase physical activity among Latina girls ages 11-14
- Dr. Dan Hughes on a randomized controlled trial testing the effectiveness of comprehensive exercise, yoga-focused exercise and general exercise on cancer survivors
- Dr. Adelita G. Cantu on "Muevete USA," which trains Latino nurses to guide Latino families to health

- Dr. Dan Hale on childhood obesity in South Texas

#### VIDEO: San Antonio Community Leaders:

- Maggie Thompson on San Antonio's efforts to encourage healthy lifestyles with its Communities Putting Prevention to Work program
- Louis Lopez on the YMCA's program to respond to obesity-related illnesses
- Dr. Peter Wald on obesity interventions for young children
- Kate Rogers on the H-E-B supermarket chain's multifaceted health promotion efforts for 2011

Also, Mark Erickson, vice president-dean of culinary education at the Culinary Institute of America, which has a campus in San Antonio, **talked** about culinary research areas, especially among the Latino populations.

I hope you will be able to watch all of the great speakers from the forum.

#### **Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.P.H.**

Director, *Salud America!*

Director, Institute for Health Promotion Research  
UT Health Science Center at San Antonio



## News Briefs

### **Latina Teen Advocates Present at State Conference**

Latina teen advocates Rose Burgos and Melanie Benitez, part of a *Salud America!* pilot research project led by Dr. Robert Dudley of the Community Health Center in Connecticut, presented their ideas about how teens can advocate for healthier communities at the Healthy ConneCTions! 2nd Annual Physical Activity and Nutrition Symposium on May 10 in Connecticut. The teens also highlighted their efforts to **re-open closed pools** to boost physical activity options in their neighborhoods. Dr. Jayme Hannay (shown here with Burgos and Benitez), a co-investigator on Dr. Dudley's project, said the conference audience of 200 state health and education leaders were very enthusiastic, and the teens received an award recognizing their efforts following their presentation.



### **Latino Childhood Obesity Video Exceeds 13K Views**

The *Salud America!* "Did You Know?/¿Sabía Usted?" video, which uses compelling statistics and child voices to document the Latino childhood obesity epidemic and motivate viewers to action, has received more than 13,000 views on YouTube and continues to be used by community groups and national conferences. If you've missed it, you can watch the video [here](#).



## Funding Opportunities

### **Grant Listings**

RWJF and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are currently seeking applications for obesity-related research funding. In addition, the National Collaborative for Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR) and Live Smart Texas collect and display grant opportunities from other organizations in the field.

#### [RWJF Calls for Proposals](#)

#### [NIH Obesity Grants](#)

#### [NCCOR Obesity Grants](#)

#### [Live Smart Texas](#)

## Stepping Up Against Latino Childhood Obesity

### Getting ‘Kids in the Kitchen’ to Make Nutrition a Tasty Topic

On May 1 in San Antonio, dozens of children from the local Boys & Girls Clubs, the Children’s Shelter and others got hands-on cooking instruction from Chef Michael Flores, learned about healthy choices at computer gaming stations and even practiced some yoga moves.

It was part of a **Junior League of San Antonio** program called Kids in the Kitchen.

The program takes aim at obesity by engaging kids in the preparation of healthy meals, to educate them and their parents about healthy choices.

“Children who know how to cook know one of life’s most important skills: the ability to prepare a healthy meal. Understanding what makes a healthy meal also helps children learn that processed, packaged and fast foods aren’t always the healthiest choices,” said Amy Erskine Hinitt, a member of the local League’s Kids in the Kitchen Committee. “We believe getting kids to appreciate fresh and healthy foods starts in the kitchen.”

A Junior League affiliate in Canada launched the first Kids in the Kitchen program in 2006.



More than 100 children participated in cooking demonstrations, exercise, and other activities at the Junior League of San Antonio’s annual Kids in the Kitchen community event on May 1.

Now, more than 200 Leagues in Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom and the United States conduct Kids in the Kitchen programs in their communities each year. Program activities include demonstrations related to preparation of healthy meals and snacks, in partnership with local community organizations, chefs and nutritionists.

The program also provides **guidelines and materials** to support the success of educational and motivational activities including bilingual recipes; tips on nutrition, fitness and healthy lifestyles; and an

interactive “Kids’ Corner.”

The Junior League of San Antonio has conducted Kids in the Kitchen activities for four years. She said she hopes the program expands in coming years.

Hinitt says the program allows a broad range of community leaders and organizations to conduct a one-day educational Kids in the Kitchen event, like the one on May 1. “It’s important that kids learn about how important – and relatively easy – it is to eat healthy and get our bodies moving,” she said.

Contact the Junior League of San Antonio [here](#).

### Salud America! NAC

Elva Arredondo  
Marice Ashe  
Laura Brennan  
Nancy Butte  
Anna Diez-Roux  
Robert Garcia  
Lawrence Green  
Robin Hamre  
Terry Huang  
Barbara Israel  
Laura Kettel Khan  
Judith Ottoson  
Frank Penedo  
Charlotte Pratt  
Maya Rockey Moore  
James Sallis  
Randy Schwartz  
Mary Story  
► **Elsie Taveras**  
Mildred Thompson  
Amy Lazarus Yaroch

## Meet the National Advisory Committee (NAC)

Dr. Elsie Taveras takes what she calls a “life course” approach to childhood obesity prevention.

In her work with colleagues at Harvard Medical School, that means understanding obesity-related risk factors—including diet, activity, sleep and weight—throughout the child’s entire life, including during infancy and even during the mother’s pregnancy.

She’s found that Latino children are less likely than whites to be breast-fed, and more likely to have a mother who had gestational diabetes during pregnancy, to be introduced to solid food early,



Elsie Taveras

to drink sugary beverages, to have a TV in their bedroom and to get insufficient sleep.

These differences have been shown to be risk factors for obesity, and they can start to have an impact

very early in a child’s life.

“One of the reasons why we see Latino children already disproportionately heavier than their white counterparts is because of some of these really interesting differences started when their mothers were pregnant,” Dr. Taveras told *Childhood Obesity* in a [recent interview](#).

Dr. Taveras, a pediatrician and health services researcher, trained in pediatrics at Children’s Hospital Boston and Boston Medical Center and received her master’s degree in public health from the Harvard School of Public Health.

She is a RWJF Physician Faculty Scholar, whose work through the program includes examining opportunities for childhood obesity prevention among underserved populations. She also directs the One Step Ahead clinic, a multidisciplinary childhood overweight prevention and early management program at Children’s Hospital Boston. She also is member of the *Salud America!* National Advisory Committee.

Continued on page 7 ►

## Grantee Corner

### Meet *Salud America!* Grantee Meizi He

Dr. Meizi He couldn't eat or sleep for days after her teen patient died of leukemia in the ward in China where she was interning as a medical doctor.

She was tired of seeing terminally ill patients die, despite her best efforts.

So she decided to pursue a career in preventive medicine, using "upstream" approaches—including healthy lifestyles, nutrition, and maternal and child health—to prevent disease.

"I have been in this field now for more than 20 years and found it rewarding to empower and equip people to live a healthy lifestyle under their circumstances," said Dr. He, who moved from China to Canada in the 2000s to hone her skills in health education and research.

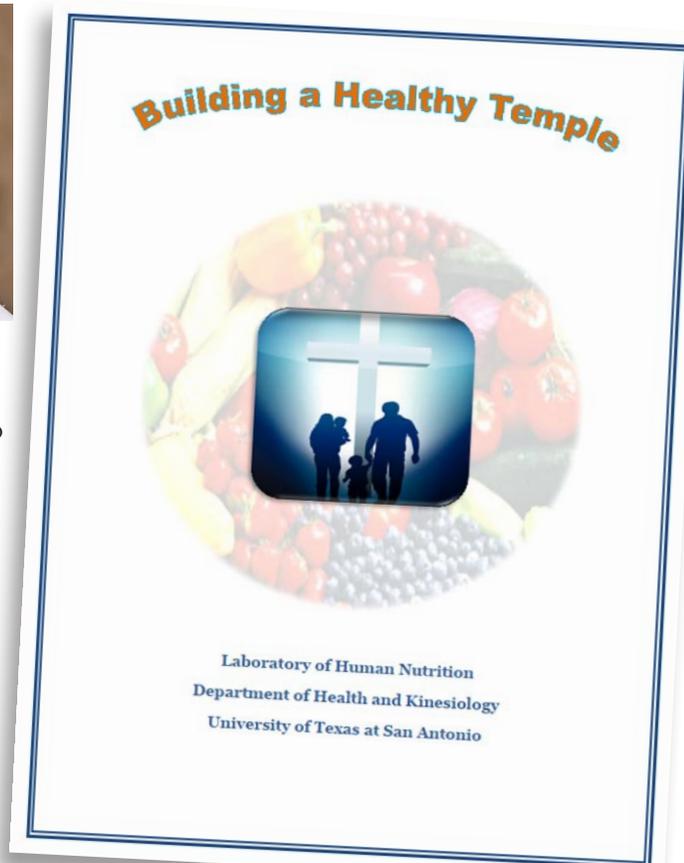
Today, Dr. He, an associate professor of health and kinesiology at UT San Antonio, develops culturally sensitive behavioral interventions to prevent and treat obesity and related nutritional disorders in school, home and community settings.

She is one of **20 pilot researchers** funded by RWJF through *Salud America!* for \$75,000 over two years.

Dr. He's project, "Building a Healthy Temple," aims to shed light on the development of innovative and effective obesity prevention programs for Latino families grounded in supportive faith-based communities. She already has gathered insights from church leaders and



Meizi He



congregations from primarily Latino churches in San Antonio.

She has found, preliminarily, that church leaders and members perceive a linkage between faith and health, and that they perceive a need for culturally sensitive obesity prevention.

"Our preliminary results highlight the need for obesity prevention among Latino children and reveals the faith-based community's potential as a venue and infrastructure for implementing effective obesity prevention strategies," Dr. He said.

She believes her study will influence non-profit groups and policymakers to enlist the help of faith-based communities in implementing and sustaining obesity prevention strategies geared to Latinos.

These strategies could help prevent diseases Dr. He says she doesn't want to see anymore.

After all, Dr. He still abides by the motto of her mentor, Dr. Fernando Guerra, the now-retired leader of the San Antonio Metropolitan Health District:

"It is of good conscience that we don't allow our brothers and sisters to suffer from the consequences of obesity and diabetes."

#### View a Slideshow of Dr. He's Project

### Building a Healthy Temple

A Faith-based Community Participatory Research Project for Preventing Childhood Obesity Among Latino Families

Meizi He, PhD  
Zenong Yin, PhD  
Jessica Leeds, MA  
Lalaine Estella Ricardo, B.S.c (candidate)

The University of Texas at San Antonio



## Grantee Corner

### Meet *Salud America!* Grantee Miriam Vega

Miriam Vega grew up in the Bronx, New York, an area plagued by crack cocaine, AIDS, and dire poverty, and where some kids' sustenance came only from school lunches.

But she got to see the other side of the coin, too.

Vega experienced a higher quality of life when she went to boarding school in Andover, Massachusetts, and then spent a year in Spain.

Experiencing many walks of life made her want to give back to those who need it—and that's just what she's done.

"There is a hunger to help children overcome the problems we have gone through," said Vega, vice president of the Latino Commission on AIDS in New York. "Our Latino communities face many health disparities and health concerns, particularly obesity and diabetes. We want to meet the community where they're at and find solutions."

Vega is one of **20 pilot researchers** funded by RWJF through *Salud America!* for \$75,000 over two years.

Her project, "La Familia en la Cocina (The Family in the Kitchen)," aims to better understand Latino parent and child knowledge, attitudes, built and cultural environments, and communication behaviors related to food consumption and food preferences.

She currently is interviewing Latina mothers and their children, who also go through a virtual supermarket simulator.

Preliminarily, she has found differences in how mothers and children communicate, possibly due to language preferences and acculturation.

Immigrant Latino mothers also tend to feel a sense of powerlessness to do anything about their or their children's weight.

"This indicates a need for renewed focus on the



A Latina girl is leading her mother through a virtual supermarket as part of Dr. Miriam Vega's *Salud America!* pilot research project



Miriam Vega

Latino family unit and programs that target the family members in ways they each can understand and process," Vega said. "If mother-child communication gaps exist due to immigration and acculturation processes, this should be considered when debating policies on parent-child communication and the Latino community."

She hopes her project will advance knowledge of effective and culturally competent communication/intervention strategies to reduce the Latino childhood obesity epidemic among recent immigrant Latino families in urban areas with high obesity rates.

Until then, she plans to continue giving back to the region where she grew up.

"We're excited to be able to contribute to the renewed national discussion on parenting and parenting responsibilities," she said, "and gain a better understanding of the hopes, aspirations and barriers faced by Latina mothers for their children's well-being."

#### View a Slideshow of Dr. Vega's Project

### La Familia En La Cocina ("the Family in the Kitchen")



Miriam Y. Vega, Ph.D

Director of Research and Evaluation  
Latino Commission on AIDS

## Research

# 'BFF' Program Finds Unique Ways to Boost Latina Girls' Physical Activity

For girls growing up on San Antonio's West Side, exercise may not be as simple as a walk in the park. They encounter stray dogs and face traffic without sidewalks. Public resources like basketball courts are often in use by boys, leaving girls reluctant to seek a turn. And parents can be uneasy about letting girls roam unsupervised.

That's why researchers at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio are testing a new program to increase girls' opportunities to become more physically active.

"Be Fit with Friends" gives girls many options to overcome barriers to physical activity. Thirty Girl Scouts began the program in February.



"We want to build a sustainable program that takes advantage of tools and resources that already exist to help girls add physical activity to their lives," said Dr. Deborah Parra-Medina of the Institute for Health Promotion Research (IHPR) at The UT Health Science Center.

"Be Fit with Friends" reaches out to girls in many ways:

- During troop meetings, Girls Scouts will learn physical activity basics, such as the difference between moderate and vigorous exercise or the importance of warming up.
- Also at meetings, Girl Scouts will try several "mobile PA (physical activity) units," which are containers filled with toys, games, and other equipment to encourage physical activity. One holds playground toys like jump ropes. Another has yoga equipment. Others have videogames for Nintendo Wii or Kinect for Xbox 360 that simulate sports and dancing.
- To connect girls to community resources, weekend activities are planned, such as volunteering at the



San Antonio Food Bank's Spurs Community Garden.

- Each girl will receive two step-counting devices for herself and a parent.
- On their cell phones, girls will receive motivational text messages, vote on favorite activities and more. There's also a Facebook group where girls can post photos, see an events calendar, watch instructional videos on YouTube and interact with each other.

"This multi-year study is an example of how agencies can come together and effect change for the betterment of communities," said Anna Maria Chávez, CEO for Girl Scouts of Southwest Texas. "Girl Scouts recognizes that physical health, emotional health and self-esteem are all connected, so this initiative supports the 'whole girl.'"

BFF was designed with the West Side community's input.

A year ago, a different group of Girl Scouts used cameras to document obstacles to physical activity in their neighborhoods. Laura Esparza, an IHPR project coordinator, said the girls "expressed concerns about stray dogs, traffic and broken, uneven or missing sidewalks."

More than two-dozen Girl Scouts in San Antonio are trying out the "Be Fit with Friends (BFF)" program, which aim to give girls many options to help overcome barriers to physical activity.

Added Parra-Medina: "And strangers—particularly if they were male."

As researchers considered how to use technology in BFF, they surveyed 102 girls. Older girls typically had their own cell phones, while younger girls shared with family members or did not have cell phone access. The most popular social-networking sites were Facebook and YouTube. Girls had videogame consoles at home but rarely used them.

The barriers identified through the photo project and information gleaned from the girls' survey results helped researchers put together opportunities (listed earlier) that would help girls overcome these barriers and get needed physical activity.

"We believe the girls and our community overall helped us design our 'Be Fit with Friends' program in a way that will give local girls a whole new perspective: that they can indeed find fun ways to engage in physical activity and overcome potential barriers," Parra-Medina said.

Find out more [here](#).

## Policy & Built Environment Corner

### Identifying Emerging Policy and Environmental Strategies to Prevent Childhood Obesity

Policymakers sometimes struggle to understand and judge the large number of promising – but relatively untested – interventions and strategies to reduce childhood obesity.

In response, an article in the *Annual Review of Public Health* provides a novel review system to identify childhood obesity policy and environmental strategies that are ready for systematic evidence reviews and/or application, or warrant further investigation.

The [article](#), “Accelerating Evidence Reviews and Broadening Evidence Standards to Identify Effective, Promising, and Emerging Policy and Environmental Strategies for Childhood Obesity Prevention,” highlights evidence gaps and ways to increase the types and amount of evidence available to



Laura Brennan

inform policy and environmental strategies to increase healthy eating and active living.

These priorities, according to the article, include documenting independent and interdependent effects, determining applicability to different populations and settings, assessing implementation fidelity and feasibility, identifying cumulative benefits and costs, ascertaining impacts on health equity, and tracking sustainability.

The main author is Dr. Laura Brennan, president and chief executive officer of Transtria, an organization dedicated to improving public health. Brennan also is a national advisor for *Salud America!* and a member of the National Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR).



## Policy Briefs

### Report: Communicating with Latinos to Implement Healthy Policies, Environments

The CDC has released [Research to Practice: Building Our Understanding](#), a series of reports focused on health communication with various audiences and marketing practices to help communities implement policy, systems and environmental change strategies for healthy lifestyles. The first report focuses on communication with Latinos.

### Three New Policy Briefs on Childhood Obesity Issues

Leadership for Healthy Communities, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation national program, has issued a trio of new “Making the Connection” policy briefs. The briefs are titled: [Linking Policies to Prevent Climate Change and Childhood Obesity](#); [Linking Academic Achievement to Policies to Promote Physical Activity](#); and [Linking Economic Growth to Policies to Prevent](#)

[Childhood Obesity](#). Past briefs on a variety of other obesity-related issues also are available.

### Spanish Web Site: Healthy Lifestyles

We Can! (Ways to Enhance Children’s Activity & Nutrition), a national movement to promote a healthy weight for kids, provides parents and communities with many Spanish-language materials, tools, and other information on its [website](#) to encourage a healthy and physically active lifestyle.

### Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center highlights federal policy issues

The RWJF Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity sends weekly email updates on policy and federal agency news. To learn more about the Center, visit its [website](#). Click on “Stay Informed” to sign up for the email updates. The Center also aims to keep people up to date on new legislation [here](#).

► Continued from page 3

## Meet the NAC: Elsie Taveras

She said she would like to see future research focus more on “promoting sustainable changes at the community-level, in addition to the individual-level behavior change interventions we now know are effective.”

She also suggested several obesity prevention strategies for racial/ethnic minority families.

“One of the things that we have learned to do is to really work within our Latino families’ cultural framework and try to get a good

understanding of their underlying beliefs about eating, physical activity, sleep and TV and try to work within that framework so that it is easier for families to understand what we are asking them to do,” Taveras told *Childhood Obesity*.

► Continued from page 1

## Tackling California Students' Low Fitness Levels

shape,” state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson said in announcing the results last week.

A Stanford University study of Redwood City Schools District and Sequoia Union High School District students pointed to one possible remedy—but also raised additional concerns about Hispanic students, who now account for a majority of California’s K-12 students.

Students in the two districts, both in Redwood City near San Francisco, took part in the study to see if after-school programs really do help improve students’ fitness. [This study was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through *Salud America!*]. In a [brief](#) released in January by Stanford’s John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, students who participated regularly in after-school programs that focus on physical activity were 10 percent more likely to pass the Fitnessgram tests. Fitness levels increased the longer students were in the programs.

However, the research uncovered a troubling fact: Hispanic students were less likely to participate, and therefore they reaped fewer fitness benefits.

The policy implications for governance leaders, said Gardner Center researcher Rebecca London [a *Salud America!* grantee], include working on ways to get the word out to parents long before fifth grade that their child is not fit, and giving families and schools tools for increasing active play.

Many such solutions maximize use of existing resources and partnerships in the community, London said, urging school leaders to especially look for ways to reach out to children who don’t take part in organized sports after school.

Editor’s Note: Reproduced from [California School News](#) with permission from the California School Boards Association. The story features *Salud America!* Grantee Dr. Rebecca London.

### About the E-newsletter

This E-newsletter is produced quarterly by *Salud America!* Please send news items or story ideas to [despres@uthscsa.edu](mailto:despres@uthscsa.edu).

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*Salud America!* The RWJF Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

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## Kids' Health Q&A

**Question:** What are some good ways to eat a healthy breakfast?

Breakfast is an important part of powering up the body for the day. Eating a balanced breakfast can help keep a family alert, improve mood and reduce mid-morning food cravings.

### Here are 10 tips for a healthier breakfast:

- **Oatmeal in an Instant** – Instant oatmeal is great on a cold morning and contains fiber and vitamins. Choose unsweetened oatmeal and sweeten it with raisins or fresh fruit.
  - **Smoothie Madness** – Blend frozen fruit (bananas and berries are great), low-fat or fat-free milk, and 100% fruit-juice for a quick, tasty breakfast smoothie with lots of nutrients.
  - **Go 100% Whole Grain** – 100% whole-grain, fiber-containing cereals served with low-fat or fat-free milk are a healthier alternative to sugary cereals.
  - **Eggxactly** – Boil, scramble or poach eggs and serve on whole-wheat toast—they’re packed with nutrition and, in appropriate portions, are great for kids.
  - **Toaster Treats** – Frozen whole-grain waffles take almost no time to make.
  - **Go Nutty** – Peanut or almond butter on whole-grain toast contains both protein and fiber.
  - **Go Fruity** – A fresh fruit cut up with a dollop of low-fat or fat-free yogurt is a great way to start the day. Apples contain fiber and bananas contain potassium.
  - **Try All-Fruit Spreads** – Instead of butter or margarine on toast, try all-fruit spreads, fruit butters, or even sliced bananas or strawberries.
  - **Bagel Classics** – Try a whole-wheat or sunflower seed bagel with low-fat cream cheese or peanut butter.
  - **Breakfast On-the-Go** – Whole-grain mini bagels or muffins, nuts and dried and fresh fruits can be taken in the car (apple slices and bananas are also easy and not too messy).
- For other ideas on how parents can instill healthy lifestyle behaviors in their children, check out [these tips](#) from the Alliance for a Healthier Generation.

