American Cancer Society's 4-Step Health Checklist for Back-to-School

This checklist covers health topics that parents can discuss with their kids to promote healthy habits and proactive health management.

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Transitioning from the carefree ease of summer to the organized, and often hectic, back-to-school schedule can lead to overlooking some essential health needs. To help parents make the shift, the American Cancer Society (ACS) has prepared a four-step checklist aimed at addressing key health issues to help ensure overall well-being this new school year.

This checklist covers health topics that parents can discuss with their kids to promote healthy habits and proactive health management.

The 4-Step Health Checklist

1. Remind your child to stay safe in the sun to protect against harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays.

It may seem like a no-brainer, but staying in the shade is the best way to avoid skin damage from UV rays. Using sunscreen when outside, no matter what the season, is essential in protecting you and your child against harmful UV rays. While a child's exposure to the sun may lessen as they head back to the classroom, applying and reapplying sunscreen as indicated on the label will help protect against UV rays when they are outside. Be sure the sunscreen you choose has broad spectrum protection (against both UVA and UVB rays) and a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher. Another important tip for parents to keep in mind is having hats, sunglasses and clothing with UV protection available to help protect skin from sun damage. Go to cancer.org/sunsafety to learn more about being safe in the sun.

Key steps to take and things to remember:

- Anyone's skin can be damaged from UV rays, regardless of skin color or tone.
- UV rays can be harmful to the skin during any season of the year.
- Check the UV Index for your area by watching or listening to a weather forecast for the day, or by checking a weather app for your location.

- If you aren't sure of the UV Index in your area, you can do the shadow test. If your shadow is shorter than you are, this tells you the sun's rays are the strongest.
- Avoid the sun between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., when UV light is strongest.
- Be especially careful on the beach or in areas with snow because sand, water, and snow reflect sunlight. This increases the amount of UV radiation you get. UV rays can also reach below the water's surface, so you can still get a sunburn even if you're in the water and feeling cool

2. Promote a balanced diet with fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins.

Protecting kids from the outer elements is just as important as protecting their inner well-being. A new school year is a great time to swap your child's summer eating habits for more nutritious and filling options. Studies from the CDC show that a well-balanced diet benefits children in many ways, including helping to increase brain function and ability to focus in school and at home.

The ACS Guideline for Diet and Physical Activity for Cancer Prevention recommends a healthy eating pattern at all ages.

A healthy eating pattern includes:

- Foods that are high in nutrients in amounts that help you get to and stay at a healthy body weight
- A variety of vegetables – dark green, red and orange, fiber-rich legumes (beans and peas), and others
- Fruits, especially whole fruits in a variety of colors
- Whole grains

A healthy eating pattern limits or does not include:

- Red and processed meats
- Sugar-sweetened beverages
- Highly processed foods and refined grain products

3. Ensure your child receives the HPV vaccine to prevent certain cancers later in life.

An essential back-to-school to-do for many parents is scheduling a well-child visit for a medical check-up, including being sure your child's vaccines are up to date. One vaccine that is strongly recommended by ACS is the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine.

The ACS Guideline for HPV Vaccine Use recommends that boys and girls get the HPV vaccine starting at age 9, with the vaccine being most effective when given between the ages of 9 and 12. Teens and young adults through age 26 who are not already vaccinated should get the HPV vaccine as soon as possible. Teens who start the series late may need 3 shots instead of 2 shots.

Studies have shown that the vaccine provides nearly total protection against infections and pre-cancers caused by the types of HPV that cause 90% of HPV cancers as well as 90% of genital warts.

4. Educate your child about the risks of vaping and smoking.

Parental guidance may just be the trick to help kids avoid this important item on the health checklist. Research has shown that teens whose parents often talk with them about the dangers of tobacco use are about half as likely to use tobacco products as those who don't have these discussions with their parents. This holds true whether the parents use tobacco themselves.

There is no safe form of tobacco and kids need to know the dangers of using any type of tobacco now and in the future. Nicotine exposure during youth can harm the developing adolescent brain and can lead to a lifetime of nicotine addiction and tobacco use. And if they've already started using cigarettes, e-cigarettes (vapes), or other forms of tobacco, helping them quit is critical to protecting their health now and later in life.

Most e-cigarettes contain addictive nicotine, potentially leading to tobacco use among non-users. Nicotine also poses risks to teenage brain development. Moreover, there have been reports of serious lung disease in some people using e-cigarettes or other vaping devices. You can learn more on the health risks of e-cigarettes, also known as vapes on cancer.org.

ACS has resources if you or anyone in your family need help quitting tobacco, visit cancer.org/quittobacco.

ACS encourages all parents to utilize this checklist as a valuable resource in preparing their children for a healthy and successful school year.

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