

NUTRITION & IMMUNITY PODCAST SERIES

GENERAL HEALTH & NUTRITION FOR CHILDREN AT HOME (FOR FAMILIES SHELTERING IN PLACE DURING THE COVID-19 EPIDEMIC)

Featuring :: Robert Murray, MD; Karyn Wulf, MD, MPH

TRANSCRIPT

Maura: It's April 28 at the time of this recording. And like many, many families around the world, mine has been sheltering in place to help prevent the spread of Covid-19. My teenage sons have been home distance-learning for just over a month.

Maura: With my boys at home and apparently feeling quite snackish, I've noticed something interesting happening in our kitchen. Full bags of tortilla chips are flying off the pantry shelves, for example. Boxes of cereal—the good kind, you know the ones—are gone in a day! All the chocolate mini eggs are no more, and I'm not even the culprit this time.

Maura: Meanwhile, though, they bypass the apples, the citrus fruits, all the green vegetables—at eye-level in our fridge—don't seem to exist in their teenage world. Beans are happening—because what burrito would be good without them, right?—so at least they're taking in some protein. Other than that, the whole thing is kind of out of control.

Maura: It's nutritional mayhem in my house. If you have kids at home, no matter what age, you probably know what I'm talking about, too. But before you judge me too harshly, please know I told my boys I'm going to make them listen to this recording. And before you judge my boys, imagine *your* mother making *you* listen to her recorded voice for 10-15 minutes. And then, imagine she has invited two experts to join her.

Maura: I'm Maura Bowen, podcasting for Abbott Nutrition Health Institute. I have the happy pleasure of recording today with pediatric gastroenterologist Dr Robert Murray, and pediatrician Dr Karyn Wulf. They're here to discuss the importance of helping kids—and parents—maintain a balanced approach to nutrition, not just in this era of Covid-19, but really anytime. They'll discuss some of the key nutrients that support health in children, and they'll talk about the role nutrition can play overall in healthy growth and development. And by the end of this, maybe we'll all know how to entice our children to eat some roasted vegetables for once.

Maura: Dr Murray, Dr Wulf, welcome. As you can tell from my intro, I'm thrilled you're here.

Dr Murray: Thanks, Maura.

Dr Wulf: Thanks for inviting me.

Maura: So, one thing to note for our listeners: This podcast recording may sound a little different than you're used to hearing. For the sake of social distancing, Dr Murray, Dr Wulf and I are all dialing in for today's discussion rather than sitting in the studio.

Maura: Can you both tell us a little bit about yourselves, your current roles, and what brought you to this area of focus in your career? Dr Murray, would you like to go first?

Dr Murray: Sure. I'm Bob Murray, I was a pediatrician who went on to get a fellowship in pediatric gastroenterology and nutrition, and I practiced at Children's Hospital here in Columbus for 21 years. And then I did some work at Abbott Nutrition for a few years, and came back and ran the weight management center doing medical and surgical weight management for five years. So, a little bit of all kinds of things. But my focus has generally been on nutrition.

Maura: Great, thank you. And how about you, Dr Wulf?

Dr Wulf: Sure, thanks, Maura. I'm a general pediatrician. I've been in practice for the past 17 years. I am the mom of four teenagers, and I'm currently the Medical Director of Pediatrics at Abbott. I was drawn to the role at Abbott because I really believe in the role of nutrition in health, and the importance of teaching our kids about good nutrition.

Maura: We're going to switch up our format a bit today, because I think our listeners would appreciate hearing a conversation between two experts.

Dr Murray: Sure!

Dr Wulf: That sounds great.

Maura: Alright. Great, let's get started. Dr Wulf, let's kick it off with you.

Dr Wulf: Sure. Dr Murray, I think one of the things we want to be clear about today is that in the setting of sheltering in place and all the stress that's going on in the world, is now the time to try to make drastic changes to try to improve your family's nutrition?

Dr Murray: No, I think rather than being more strict about nutrition I'd relax a little. I think the important thing is to be practical and do the best you can with the situation you're facing. But with your kids at home, and the social situation and a lot of worry among both adults and kids, I think this is not the time to be terribly strict about nutrition.

Dr Wulf: As we are thinking about nutrition in general, before we get into some details and some tips and tricks for parents at home right now, could you give us an understanding about the state of pediatric and adolescent nutrition in the US before the Covid-19 pandemic hit?

Dr Murray: Sure. You know, we've made some good progress in pediatric nutrition. It's been slow, but it's coming along. As you know, back in the late '70s, early '80s, we started to see the first signs of the obesity epidemic, and it caught everybody by surprise. And by the turn of the century, around 2000, we were really having a lot of problems with child nutrition. Because of our focus on fat, we really had begun to consume many more simple sugars and many more calories. And so, people were becoming obese. Since that time, though, we've seen some decent progress. We've dropped sugar intake in this country and among kids by 15-20% since its peak around the 2000 period. And if you look at the healthy eating index scores of kids dating back 25 years, there's been slow, steady progress as we've improved messaging and begun to improve school meals, WIC, child and adult feeding programs and the like. As those standards have come up we've really seen an improvement in nutrition. So, we entered this lockdown with some progress made. Temporarily, we're probably getting a little setback, but nothing too severe.

Dr Wulf: That's great news overall, and it's great to hear. I think one of the things you mentioned was about school nutrition and WIC. One of our concerns that happens around the pandemic is that schools are shut down. What is the impact of this on childhood nutrition?

Dr Murray: Well, as you know, WIC is the Women, Infants and Children program, and about half the country are eligible because of risks for nutrition and poverty. So in the first few years of life, WIC plays an enormous role in terms of nutrition and getting the child off to a good start. For families who are in trouble, we have the SNAP program—the old food stamps program—which helps the family as a whole. But very importantly for children, we have the school meal program. So, we have school breakfasts, national school lunch program, after-school meals, summer meals, and all of these collectively have had a very positive effect on child nutrition and diet quality. So, the fact that kids are out of school, is a huge financial burden to families, but it's also a nutritional risk for children.

Dr Wulf: I know that in our school district and many around, before online learning even got up and running, we had school lunches being distributed. I'm not sure if that's the case everywhere, but it speaks to the importance of the school lunch program phase in childhood nutrition in the United States.

Dr Murray: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. And you know, we were worried about it previous to this Covid-19 infection because we would see these kids who were really propped up by school meals suddenly go out into the summer for three months, and for a child who is food insecure, that is a very risky and difficult period, where they're not sure where the next meal is going to come from. So we're really trying our best to relax the rules around USDA and the in the different states so that we can come up with creative ways to get these meals to kids, even though they're sheltering in place.

Dr Wulf: So Dr Murray, can you take a step back and explain to us why we talk about good nutrition. What beyond satisfying hunger does good nutrition do for the developing body of a child?

Dr Murray: It does many, many things. It's one of the key three things that makes a child's foundation strong. One of them is diet quality, because the body—not just the muscles and the bones—but all the organs and particularly the brain are dependent on consistent flow of high-quality nutrition to develop optimally. And the other two things that go along with that to help a child: one is an environment that really gives them challenges and opportunities to explore, because that's how a child learns—is that early exploration, and then the third is nurturing relationships with adults. So if a child has those three—diet quality, a stimulating, safe environment to explore, and good nurturing relationships—that really brings out the best in kids.

Dr Wulf: I think it's so important to stress that it's the whole picture and not just nutrition, but nutrition is one of those key roles. I think a question I get a lot in practice is, "How do I know if my child is getting enough of the right nutrients. And how to I make sure they're eating a high-quality diet. And as kids go through the different phases they eat different amounts of foods. Do you have any advice you've given your patients around that, Dr Murray?"

Dr Murray: Yeah, I usually approach nutrition pretty simply, although you have teenagers, Karyn, and nothing is simple about nutrition and teenagers. But when I think about nutrition for myself or for my family, or talking to other families, I really approach it pretty simply. There are five food groups: Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, dairy and quality proteins. And so the name of the game is to really mix and match these five food groups at all meals and all snacks. Your goal is for the child to see a broad diversity within each of those five groups. So one of the first questions I always would ask a child when I was talking to them was, "What food in the grain group do you like? What crackers, what breads, what cereals? What food do you like in the dairy group?" Every child and every parent should be able to identify some rock-solid foundational foods that really make that group strong. So, if you think about quality proteins, the child may really like eggs or beans or peanut butter and those are good foundation foods to build around. If you can do that in those five food groups, you can mix and match with a lot of diversity, you'll fill in all those gaps. And you don't have to worry so much about individual nutrients.

Dr Wulf: One of the things you mentioned was that diversity. And from introducing new foods to infants, we know that sometimes it takes up to 20 or more times of introducing a new food before a child will accept it. And that's a lot of "no"s or potential dislikes before a food becomes more acceptable. How can we do that more routinely? Or what if children are a little older? Does it get any easier to introduce new foods to them as they get older?

Dr Murray: No, it doesn't. It doesn't get easier. But I think you have this window of opportunity early in life where the child is relatively open to novel flavors and tastes and smells and colors. So that advice you just gave is really important, particularly when they're young. Don't get uptight about it. If they turn away from a food, keep bringing it back and keep trying it in different guises so that the child experiences the smells and tastes and flavors over and over and over again. That's the key to acceptance. We talk about the pluses and minuses of baby-led weaning. But one of the things I like to take away from baby-led weaning, where you let the child play with new foods. So if you steam broccoli or you give them carrot pieces, they actually play with them first—touch them, smell them, feel them—and then gradually that becomes something that they accept, and that's part of that offering them food multiple times. Let them play with the food, and they'll naturally explore the food on their own.

Dr Wulf: I think that leads well into our next idea, which is as our kids get older, and we are sheltering in place, you may have an opportunity to do a little more cooking and meal planning with your child. I know my teenagers are much more interested in how we're cooking things and what's for dinner. I've challenged them to think about meal planning as well. But for your school-age children, the opportunity of spending extra time at home is maybe you have more time to get them involved with cooking. And we know that children who do help to select certain foods or help with meal preparation are more likely to try those foods even if they're new. And especially in a time where we're talking about stress and some challenges of the emotional aspects of being stuck at home, giving kids some control over choice in some of those food preparations is actually one of the methods of helping to control stress, is giving them a choice. It's a great way to get them to experiment with some new foods and also be mindful of their emotional well-being during this time.

Dr Murray: Yeah, that's great advice. I think anything we can do to get the child involved in the planning and the thinking and cooking and things will help nutrition go a long way. And if they have a certain set of foods that they like—maybe they particularly like salsa—you can try other things with that salsa to help branch out a little at a time, and that kind of incremental change is the secret to building good nutrition. Not the wholesale swap-out of foods, but actually taking the foods they like and finding ways to make that a little stronger each time.

Dr Wulf: One of the other interesting things about this time of sheltering in place is the opportunity to have family meals. There has been a lot of research done on the importance of family meals in particular, but we do know that children who eat meals as a family routinely experience many benefits. But some of them are actually eating a wider variety of foods. They witness their parents eating these foods, they're more likely to try them as well. And there's some long-term positive outcomes around obesity and overall intake of quality of nutrition. So, one of the things we talked about possibly reducing stress was to have some routine in your day to day, and the opportunity of introducing routine family dinners if that wasn't already part of your family's routine. It might be a great habit to start while you're sheltering in place.

Dr Murray: Yeah, that's a huge bullet point for everyone. If you haven't been doing family meals, to start them. And if you have, don't give them up now. Structure in the day is one of the most powerful destressing things for a child. They know what's coming. They know what to expect. And so you don't want them to have disrupted sleep schedules. You want them to wake up and have three meals and one or two snacks during the daytime. You want that family meal to be there. You want to have a pre-bedtime routine and read books with them before bed to settle them down. And I think if the family sticks with that, that really would make the sheltering in place much more of a positive event for both the child and the parent.

Dr Wulf: As we start to think past meal time—and one Maura's questions as we started—was this idea of snacking. I'm going to tell you my own personal experience with four teenagers in my house: We are going through snacks faster than any of the healthy foods. And I started doing something I used to do when the kids were little. I'm up before everyone else in the morning starting my day working from home, and when I get up, I make a smoothie for everyone. If it's made, it's amazing, it all gets consumed! But if everyone's left to their own devices, someone takes a box of cereal and a spoon and just takes it up to their room. One of the tips and trips we've heard for healthy snacking is, if you can see it, you'll eat it. So be careful what you put out on your counters. One other trick I'll just

share is, for many years when the kids were little, I would put together a plate of maybe carrots, cucumbers, some fresh veggies that they liked, and some sort of dip that they liked, like hummus or yogurt-based ranch dip, and I would put that out while I was making dinner, and that seemed to stem the flow of questions for snacks or going to the pantry. So that idea that if it's out, they will eat it, is a way to try to get those fruits and veggies out of the fridge and onto a plate where they can more easily walk by and consume it.

Dr Murray: That's a fabulous idea for any parent. When you look at things like ranch dressing, but other dips—hummus, salsa, guacamole, bean dip, yogurt—all of those are great opportunities. You have one food group already sitting there for a snack and you can build around that using pita bread or crackers—or as you used, certain types of dips and you can dip food in them. Those kind of things attract a child, and that's your opportunity to build out. Try new things, build around it. They already like the dip, so that's a great opportunity to try things. I like smoothies as well because you can tailor those to the kid, and it's fairly easy to make and blend up. But if you don't have a blender, you can still make parfaits and things out of yogurt, whole grains and fruit. You have three food groups right there in one snack. And that's how I think adults can think about nutrition in a way that is simple and direct. Think about food groups, think about mixing and matching, but at the same time, don't forget that there's a joy to feeding and eating. This isn't supposed to be torture, it's supposed to be fun.

Dr Wulf: I think that's great advice around both incorporating multiple food groups in each eating opportunity, whether that's a snack or a meal, but also remembering that eating can be fun. I think one of the questions we talked about but didn't fully answer was the idea of the role of nutrition in immunity. And I think you hear a lot about taking large supplements or high doses of supplements, and what I think is really key to remember is that vitamins are important parts of many of the functions of our bodies—the cellular functions. And immunity is just one of those cellular functions our body has. So if you're eating a wide variety of foods—I always talk about eating the rainbow, so if you can eat fruits and vegetables from all different colors of the rainbow, you really are getting a lot of those micronutrients and vitamins that you need to support the immune system. And if you're eating a healthy and well-balanced diet, large supplements are not necessary. And so the goal is to increase the diversity of the foods that your children are eating, and give them the chance to play and experiment and participate in the selection and trying of new foods and recipes.

Dr Murray: Yeah, I agree. You know, the one time I do recommend supplements is when the child is extraordinarily picky. Most kids grow out of that kind of picky phase when they're young, but some are genuinely picky, and supplements may help ease parents' minds and at the same time fill in gaps. The other group I always worry about are teenagers who have a tendency—even if they know nutrition pretty well—they have a tendency to drift away during their teen years and then come back as young adults to a more sound nutritional base. So I do worry about those groups as far as supplements—particularly young females who are moving from adolescents into young adulthood and into childbearing years, you want them as protected as much as possible with a really high-quality diet.

Dr Wulf: I think those are great points. As we think about wrapping up this podcast, are there resources that you like to refer patients or families to get more information around nutrition?

Dr Murray: Yeah, I have a few of them. There's so much stuff on the internet, and it's really tough I think (unless you have a PhD in nutrition) to know how sound these different resources are. So I usually tell people to focus on the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Those are the dietitians, and their website is eatright.org. They have lots and lots of good, sound nutritional advice. The American Academy of Pediatrics has another website called healthychildren.org, and there is again a lot of information about pediatrics in general, but some good information on nutrition. I would recommend you find a few good, dependable sites and stick with their advice instead of shopping around all over the internet.

Dr Wulf: So think our key takeaways for parents during this unusual time of sheltering in place is don't stress about nutrition too much at this time, find opportunities to spend some time with your kids either exploring new recipes,

trying new things, allowing them the chance to touch and play and experiment with food a little bit; try to incorporate your five food groups into each eating opportunity, whether that's snacking or meals; and to really—if it isn't already part of your family routine, set the routine of a family meal in the evenings to both anchor the day for the children as well as develop long-term healthy eating habits. Dr Murray, did you have anything else that you wanted to add?

Dr Murray: You know, I'll add one other thing because it's kind of a focus of attention for a lot of parents. When you think about things like sugar and fat and salt, rather than focusing directly on those, think about what food is underneath those things. If you have a child who really, really likes bacon, and you can use that bacon to sell a salad, that's a good trade. If they really like sweets and sugar, and the stuff underneath it is high-quality, you know yogurt and fruit and whole grains, that's a good trade. It's not the sugar, it's what's underneath that's most important.

Maura: Great. Thank you both so much. You're helping me to walk away with some new ideas to try with my own kids, which I really appreciate. We really appreciate your willingness to help build awareness for the important role nutrition can play in keeping kids healthy today and when this pandemic has finally ended.

Maura: And for our listeners: If you're hoping for more podcast episodes on nutrition and immunity, rest assured we're developing a series of additional episodes to help support you—including a second episode with Dr Murray and Dr Wulf, where they'll talk about kids and exercise in the era of Covid-19. You can find these recordings on anhi.org by clicking "RESOURCES" then "PODCASTS & VIDEOS" at the top of the page. Don't miss an episode: Become an anhi.org member today by clicking "REGISTER" at the top of our homepage to receive regular nutrition science news updates from our team. Or, follow the Abbott Nutrition Health Institute on LinkedIn.

Maura: Finally, our website, anhi.org, has a series of printable resources related to this topic—for instance, infographics on [nutrition and immunity](#), [dehydration](#), and [why maintaining muscle matters](#). You can find these resources on anhi.org by clicking "RESOURCES" and "PRINTABLE MATERIALS."

Maura: Thanks everyone. Stay healthy and safe.