Play More, Watch Less

Love it or hate, TV is part of American family life. Americans watch three to four hours of TV daily. This also includes watching prerecorded movies, playing videogames and surfing the Internet, sometimes simultaneously. We undeniably enjoy these activities, which can be relaxing, entertaining and educational.

Like too much of any good thing, research suggests that the amount of screen time we spend can have negative consequences. We are more likely to snack on high-calorie foods while watching TV and less likely to be physically active.

There is no other waking activity that burns fewer calories than watching TV. This includes other sedentary activities like playing video games, reading and talking on the phone.

Adults who watches three hours of TV a day are far more likely to be obese than adults who watch less than one hour. The same goes for children. The risk for becoming and remaining overweight before the age of 9 increases with the amount of TV time.

**National Turn It Off Week**, April 21-27, 2008, is a good time to take a look at your family’s viewing habits. How many hours are spent in front of a TV or computer screen compared to other activities?

- Instead of turning on the TV and plopping down on the couch, gather the family and come up with a list of alternate activities. Jot down lots of ideas and post them on the refrigerator. (See suggestions on the other side of this fact sheet.)
- Make changes gradually. Set limits. Experts recommend no more than two hours a day of TV, computers, video games and DVDs for kids.
- Going “cold turkey” can backfire. We crave what we can’t have.
- Know what your children, at any age, are watching - whether its cartoons, sitcoms, sports, news or educational. Talk to them about what they’re seeing. Ask open-ended questions.
- Take TVs out of bedrooms. Sleeping with the TV on, even with the sound off, can disrupt sleep patterns and contribute to fatigue. Kids who have sets in their bedrooms also score lower in math, reading and language arts than kids who don’t.
- Turn off the TV during meals. Use the time to talk about everyone’s day.
Things to Do Instead of Watching Television

Families

Plan and prepare meals together
Visit a park or public library
Go on a picnic
Play charades, board games
Take a walk down the street and collect litter
Dance and sing to music (check your library for music)
Have a family talent night
Take a "Sunday drive" to a new place
Plan a dream vacation or party
Walk around the neighborhood and talk about different houses, trees and gardens
Catch up at mealtimes ("Share one good thing and one bad thing about your day...")
Assign everyone a housekeeping chore and schedule a time to do them; celebrate when done
Catch-up on letter writing, cards and phone calls

Adults

Read a book or magazine; find an author you like and read everything s/he has written
Look for and try new recipes
Do stretching exercises or yoga
Clean out a closet, the garage or basement
Gather and give away old clothes and household items
Find a new hobby or dive in to a neglected one
Plant flower seeds indoors; when they have sprouted several inches, transplant them outside
Volunteer in your community
Clean under the refrigerator and stove
Hand-wash woolen sweaters
Set up an easy-to-use recycling station
Read the local newspaper
Organize family photos and write picture captions
Start a scrapbook about your family

Teenagers

Think about future careers or jobs; write a story about yourself being successful in that career or job
Volunteer
Write poems or short stories
Plan and plant a vegetable garden; create a weeding schedule for the family
Sing along to your favorite music; try writing down the lyrics and understanding the song’s meaning
Interview your favorite relatives and record their stories
Do stretching exercises or yoga with friends
Find a cause, such as saving the earth, that interests you and get involved with a friend
Make a list of things you want to learn; visit the library for books on those subjects
Find a recipe that your family really likes and practice making it so that it becomes your specialty
Take up a new hobby or sport that interests you

6 – 12 years

Play hide and seek indoors or out
Make a list of what you like about yourself
Play flashlight tag in the dark
Play board games, cards, dictionary-based or memory games
Crafts: make greeting cards or wrapping paper, bead necklaces or bracelets, weave friendship bracelets, macrame a hanging plant holder, necklace, or bracelet
Learn to play a musical instrument and practice every day
Stand on one foot and try to keep a balloon in the air using your hands and foot
Set a goal to learn something new or to save money for something you want, and create a plan to achieve your goal
Write letters to a grandparent or favorite relative
Write a play for family members to act out

Under 5 years

Practice spelling new words, including names of family members
Create toy boxes that can be rotated by day or week (adds an element of surprise)
Make available plain paper, old magazines, safe scissors, markers or crayons, and tape
Keep a dress-up basket full of clothing and safe accessories
Put a long line of masking tape on the floor to use as a balance beam
Have lots of books available (board books and picture books); visit your local library
Practice writing letters, numbers and your name
Create an obstacle course in the yard
Play with water in the kitchen on a protected surface with bowls, cups and spoons
Provide puppets and encourage children to put on a puppet show
Have a parade with simple musical instruments