

The ABCs of back-to-school health

Tuesday September 1, 2015 12:01 AM

By [Matthew Nojiri](#)

The official end of summer doesn't come until Sept. 22.

But for kids, those yellow school buses pulling up to their neighborhood corner signal that summer really is over.

The back-to-school buzz can be a hectic time for children and their parents, but it's always important to keep health in mind, said Dr. Anne Ambarian, co-medical director of Patient First in Wyomissing. For kids, the emphasis on health covers a lot of different areas, from vaccinations and diet to managing stress and getting enough sleep.

"The main thing is to try and not have too much on their plate," Ambarian said of the stress that can come with the start of the school year.

The federal Centers for Disease Control says that good health and learning often go hand and hand. Developing good habits at an early age can also give kids a road map for health that they can follow for the rest of their lives, experts say.

As students return to school, Ambarian provided some important tips to help children get through the school year healthy.

Vaccinations

Before students ever step foot in the classroom, they need to get vaccinated, Ambarian said. Schools track student vaccinations, and state guidelines require kids to have shots for a host of different illnesses before they can come for the first day of school. They will need another round of booster vaccines before the seventh grade.

The state requires vaccination for all students except for those with medical or religious exceptions, including people who have strong moral or ethical convictions against vaccination.

Ambarian said vaccinations are critical to keep kids healthy and to prevent the spread of contagious diseases. Parents should follow up with their child's pediatrician to make sure their child is up to date.

"It's very important," Ambarian said. "Just for the kids themselves and for other kids (who can't get vaccinated)."

She also recommends kids get the flu shot when it becomes available because they are spending so much time in schools where viruses can circulate quickly.

Nutrition and sleep

Students need to eat a healthy diet and get enough sleep at night, Ambarian said. Tired, hungry kids will have a harder time learning than those who are sleeping enough and eating healthy, she added.

That means kids should be eating breakfast. They should also have a nutritious lunch or know how to make the right choices in the lunchroom cafeteria, she said. Students will also probably need a snack or two to help get through the school day.

"You want a balance of fruits, vegetables, protein," she said. "It should not be heavily carb-loaded. You don't want a sandwich bag of pretzels and a bag of chips."

She said parents tend to know their children shouldn't be drinking soda all the time, but juice can also be a problem since it is high in sugar.

She said kids will eat healthy foods if they are available to them. Good nutrition is not about having a perfect diet every day. It's about having a plan and knowledge about what's healthy.

"They do eat them if they are exposed to it," Ambarian said of fruits and vegetables. "Getting kids exposed to them is part of the battle.

Sleep is important for kids of all ages, but there are some barriers that stop them from getting enough. She said smartphones, homework, sports and other activities can make it tough, but it needs to be a priority.

"You will routinely hear them up to 12 or 1 doing homework or getting home late from a sporting event," she said. "They need their sleep to recharge, to grow, so the body can do what it's supposed to. It needs that down time."

Anything else?

Growing up, particularly the high school years, can be hard, Ambarian said.

Kids face all sorts of pressures to make good grades, to make friends and to fit in. Those pressures have always been there, but the Internet and social media can complicate matters.

She said parents need to spend time with their children and look for any signs of behavior changes. That could be anything from being really irritable to changes in sleep patterns.

"Most of us would not want to do it again," she said. "With the added pressures they have, I certainly feel for them. They are so protected yet so exposed."

Lastly, Ambarian said she stresses to student drivers that they need to take that responsibility very seriously.

"No texting and driving, it's a message I hammer," she said. "We've gotten the seat belt (message) over the last 25 years. This is the next step."

Contact Matthew Nojiri: 610-371-5062 or mnojiri@readingeagle.com.