

Panhandle

Public Health District

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Back-to-School: Build Healthy Habits with 5 to Thrive

As students across the Panhandle prepare to head back to the classroom, Panhandle Public Health District (PPHD) encourages families to start the school year strong by building healthy routines inspired by the 5 to Thrive campaign. These simple daily habits help children and adults improve their physical health, mental wellbeing, and readiness to learn.

"The beginning of a new school year is a fresh start for the whole family," said Cheri Farris, Wellbeing Program Coordinator at Panhandle Public Health District. "The small choices we make each day, what we eat, how much we move, how well we sleep, and how we care for our mental health, can have a lasting impact on a child's success both in and out of the classroom."

PPHD's 5 to Thrive campaign encourages families to focus on five simple daily habits. Aim for a minimum of:

- 5 servings of fruits and vegetables to fuel growing bodies and developing brains.
- 4 glasses of water to stay hydrated and energized throughout the school day.
- 3 servings of lean protein to help maintain steady energy, support growth, and keep blood sugar stable for improved focus and learning.
- 2 hours or less of recreational screen time to encourage better sleep, stronger family connections, and more time for active play.
- 1 hour of movement each day, whether it's walking, biking, playing outside, participating in sports, or enjoying active family time.

Additional Back-to-School Wellness Tips

Prioritize Sleep. A consistent sleep schedule helps children concentrate, regulate emotions, strengthen their immune systems, and perform better academically.

Recommended nightly sleep:

- Preschoolers: 10–13 hours
- School-age children: 9–12 hours
- Teens: 8–10 hours



Families can make the transition easier by gradually adjusting bedtimes and wake-up times before school begins.

Pack a Brain-Boosting Breakfast and Lunch. Meals that include lean protein, whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats provide lasting energy and help students stay focused throughout the day. Packing nutritious snacks such as yogurt, cheese, fruit, vegetables, nuts (when permitted), or whole-grain crackers can also help prevent afternoon energy slumps.

Pack Healthy Lunches Without Breaking the Budget. Packing healthy lunches doesn't have to be expensive. Planning ahead and choosing simple, nutritious foods can help families save money while giving students the fuel they need to learn and stay active.

Try these budget-friendly lunch ideas:

- Build meals around affordable lean proteins such as peanut butter (where permitted), tuna, beans, eggs, turkey, or leftover chicken.
- Add fresh, frozen, or seasonal fruits and vegetables.
- Choose whole-grain breads, tortillas, crackers, or pasta.
- Pack reusable water bottles instead of sugary drinks to save money and stay hydrated.
- Prepare lunches the night before to reduce morning stress and avoid last-minute convenience foods.

Choose Water More Often. Sugary drinks like soda, sports drinks, sweet tea, and fruit-flavored beverages can add large amounts of added sugar without providing lasting energy. Water is the best choice for staying hydrated during the school day and supports concentration, physical activity, and overall health.

PPHD also encourages families to avoid energy drinks for children and teens. Energy drinks often contain high levels of caffeine and other stimulants that can increase heart rate, raise blood pressure, disrupt sleep, contribute to anxiety, and interfere with healthy growth and development. Water and low-fat milk remain the healthiest beverage choices for most students.

Support Mental Wellbeing. Returning to school often brings excitement, but it can also bring stress, worry, or anxiety for both students and parents. Creating predictable routines, talking openly about feelings, spending quality time together, and making time for physical activity all support emotional wellbeing.

Families looking for additional mental health and wellbeing resources can access PPHD's free CredibleMind platform, which offers trusted, evidence-based information, self-assessments, articles, videos, and tools to support mental wellness for teens and adults. Visit <https://pphd.crediblemind.com/> to explore resources anytime. CredibleMind provides expert-vetted mental health information tailored to a wide range of wellbeing topics and is available at no cost to Panhandle residents.

Practice Healthy Hygiene. Healthy habits help reduce the spread of illness throughout the school year:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water.
- Cover coughs and sneezes.
- Stay home when sick.
- Stay up to date on recommended vaccinations.

Be School Ready. Before the first day of school, families are encouraged to:

- Schedule annual wellness visits.
- Complete required school health forms.
- Review medications and emergency plans.
- Make sure backpacks fit properly and are not overloaded.

PPHD also reminds motorists to use extra caution as students return to school. Slow down in school zones, watch for children walking or biking, and always stop for school buses loading or unloading students.

"The healthy habits children develop today can last a lifetime," Farris said. "The 5 to Thrive campaign reminds us that better health doesn't have to be complicated. Small, consistent choices each day help children thrive in the classroom, at home, and throughout their lives."

To learn more about the **5 to Thrive** campaign, local wellness programs, and community health resources, visit **Panhandle Public Health District** at <https://www.pphd.ne.gov/5toThrive.htm> or call **308-220-8020**.

To learn more about many topics related to wellbeing and stress, please visit <https://pphd.crediblemind.com/>

For more information about local health programs and resources, contact Nicole Berosek, Wellness and Prevention Program Manager, at nberosek@pphd.ne.gov, or 308-279-3496.

Did you see the latest PWWC newsletter? If not, check it out here: <https://pphd.ne.gov/pwwc.html>

For additional information about worksite wellness, visit the website or call Berosek at 308-279-3496. The Panhandle Worksite Wellness Council is proudly part of Panhandle Public Health District and specializes in supporting employers in the Panhandle region. We recognize that many employers support a diverse and remote workforce and offer innovative ways to overcome the challenge of working with a virtual team. We understand that many of our employers do not have full-time wellness resources and work to provide resources and training to make running a worksite wellness program as easy as possible.

Panhandle Public Health District is working together to improve the health, safety and quality of life for all who live, learn, work and play in the Panhandle. Our vision is that we are a healthier and safer Panhandle community.

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