

## BACKGROUND

# GIRLSCOUTS AND HEALTH

### Why It Matters

Girls' self-confidence is lowest during the teen and preteen years, making girls vulnerable to negative influences and apt to participate in risky behavior. Studies show that compared with their male counterparts, girls are more inclined to turn to cigarettes, diet pills, alcohol, and other substances in response to negative self-image. Furthermore, an alarming 30 percent of adolescent girls have contemplated suicide at one time or another.

Resisting unhealthy influences and establishing positive habits during youth are essential for good health throughout adulthood. Researchers know that the causes of premature death among women—lung cancer, other cancers, heart disease, and AIDS—are all associated with behaviors that often begin during adolescence.

As the preeminent organization for girls, the Girl Scouts is committed to helping girls grow strong in body, mind, and spirit. Knowledge and healthy habits gained through Girl Scout programs can help girls make responsible decisions about their bodies that will benefit them for a lifetime.

### Program Activities

The Girl Scouts offers the following health-related programs that emphasize the importance of a healthy body, mind, and spirit:

- **GirlSports** is a major initiative aimed at getting girls involved in fitness and health. It promotes lifelong habits with a healthy focus on diet, nutrition, and exercise.
- *Girl Scouts Against Smoking*, a series of activity booklets that provide information on the hazards of smoking, empowers girls with skills to resist tobacco. In addition, GSUSA is a supporter of a number of major health campaigns such as the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, National Osteoporosis Foundation, American Health Foundation, Child Health Day, and the National Center for Health Education.
- Relay for Life, a collaboration of the American Cancer Society and several Girl Scout councils, teaches girls about cancer prevention through discussions with cancer survivors.
- The Just for Girls Girl Scout Web site provides continuing information on health tips and activities that empower girls to grow healthy and strong.
- Girl Power! is a collaboration with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to help 9- to 14-year-old girls develop skills to resist unhealthy influences and make positive decisions in their lives.

### Did you know...

- ➔ That 80 percent of females actively diet before the age of 18, increasing their chances of developing an eating disorder?
- ➔ That during their youth, girls can substantially decrease their chances of developing heart disease, osteoporosis, and breast cancer later in life?
- ➔ That fitness expert Donna Richardson and child psychologist Brenda Collins were Girl Scouts?

## History

Unbeknownst to many, Juliette Gordon Low, the founder of the Girl Scouts, suffered from a host of physical ailments. In fact, most of her life she had a hearing disability. Low, however, never allowed her disability to impede her from traveling extensively or pursuing a myriad of interests.

When she started the Girl Scout movement in 1912, Low wanted to help girls grow into productive, self-reliant women. Early on she realized that in order to accomplish this goal, girls would need to be strong physically as well as mentally. Early Girl Scout handbooks clearly reflect this vision.

Although some of its chapters may now seem antiquated, a 1913 handbook contained practical information on everything from first aid to domestic arts. The chapter on health has entire sections on the nose, ears, eyes, and teeth and how keeping these body parts healthy relates to Girl Scouting. Girls could even earn proficiency badges for learning how to treat snakebites and poison ivy.

Today's handbooks, which respond to the contemporary health needs of girls, continue the Girl Scouts' emphasis on health. There are sections on body image, self-esteem, nutrition, and the benefits of physical activity. Many Girl Scout councils also offer workshops on AIDS awareness, eating disorders, and drug and alcohol use. By addressing real issues and teaching healthy habits for life, GSUSA is helping girls grow healthy and strong.

### Who We Are

*Girl Scouts is the world's preeminent organization dedicated solely to girls—all girls—where, in an accepting and nurturing environment, girls build character and skills for success in the real world. In partnership with committed adults, girls develop qualities that will serve them all their lives—like strong values, social conscience, and conviction about their own potential and self-worth. In Girl Scouts, girls discover the fun, friendship, and power of girls together. Through the many enriching experiences provided by Girl Scouting, they grow courageous and strong.*

***Girl Scouts. Where Girls Grow Strong.***

### Additional Resources

Girl Scouts can earn the following health-related Girl Scout badges and patches: "Health and Fitness," "Exploring Healthy Eating," "Becoming a Teen," "Healthy Relationships," "My Self-Esteem," "Family Living Skills," "Making Decisions," "First Aid," "Women's Health," "Conflict Resolution," "From Fitness to Fashion," "Your Best Defense," "From Stress to Success," "The Food Connection," and "Understanding Yourself and Others."

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