

Feeding Young Children

Fact Sheet No. 9.366

Food and Nutrition Series | Health

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Developing Children's Eating Habits

Our food habits begin to develop the day we are born and each one of us learns at an early age which foods we like and dislike. Young children learn by watching others and this applies to their eating habits as well. A child often looks to someone else to model the appropriate behavior. Through the foods we serve and the examples we set, parents and care givers can help children form sound eating habits.

Tips to Follow

Serve nutritious foods in an attractive environment. When planning meals, either for your own child or child care home/center, provide a wide variety of nutritious foods served in an attractive manner.

Serve foods that are flavorful and colorful. Consider the flavor of the foods you serve. Generally, young children reject strong flavors, although many children like pickles and some spicy sauces. Children also do not like their foods to be too hot or too cold.

Children have a natural interest in color. Green, orange, yellow, and pink are some of the more popular colors that children like. Presenting food on colorful plates or in colorful ways can help make eating fun.

Encourage participation in meal preparation. Young children often have a limited number of foods they like and their likes can change often and unexpectedly. Eating only one type of food is what we sometimes call a food jag. One way to help children over food jags is to involve them in planning and preparing meals and snacks. If they feel like they have a part in selecting, preparing, and serving foods, they're more likely to try different foods. If you have a garden, involve your children in picking food from the garden.

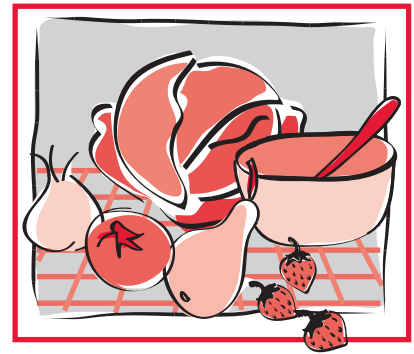
Offer children choices in foods. Give children some control over what they're eating by offering them choices. For example, ask which vegetable they would like for supper and follow through on their suggestions.

Introduce new foods with old favorites. When introducing new foods, it's best to start with small changes. Introduce new foods with old favorites and serve them at the beginning of the meal when children are most hungry.

Provide small portions to encourage appropriate food habits. To accommodate varying appetites, it is best to offer small portions and encourage preschoolers to ask for second helpings, if desired. Because preschool children are not growing as rapidly as they were as infants, their appetites tend to decrease. Also, due to growth spurts and competing interests, a preschooler's appetite varies from day to day.

Provide a clean, comfortable environment with appropriate utensils. It is important for the child to have a place at a table that is appropriate for his or her size. If available, child-size furniture is desirable. Provide children with utensils that they can handle. Many children are slow in learning how to handle eating utensils correctly. Children learn to eat with utensils through encouragement, praise, and practice, not force or punishment.

Plan regular meal and snack times and eat together. Because of their small stomachs and short attention spans, preschool children like to snack. Most preschoolers eat four to five snacks or meals each day. Plan snacks as you do meals, as snacks can be an excellent way to get needed nutrients into a child's diet. As a parent or caregiver, join children at mealtimes whenever possible. Have a pleasant conversation and set a good example for proper eating behavior at the table. Eating together helps children learn that eating can and should be a pleasurable and enjoyable experience.



Quick Facts

- Parents and care givers influence the eating habits of children through the foods they serve and the examples they set.
- Use the MyPyramid Food Guidance System when planning meals and snacks for children.
- Planned snacks can be an excellent way to get needed nutrients into a child's diet.
- Children triple their weight during their first year, then add approximately one birth weight every year until they reach puberty.
- Give children ample time to finish eating, but never force them to eat or finish everything on their plates.

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Planning Healthy Meals Using the Dietary Guidelines

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans provide a framework for planning nutritious meals for children. Here are some ways to incorporate the Dietary Guidelines into meal planning.

Offer and eat a variety of foods.

Offering a variety of foods, prepared in different ways, makes meals and snacks more interesting for children. It also makes good nutrition sense. Everyone needs many different nutrients for good health and some foods provide more of one nutrient than another. For example, milk is a good source of calcium while meats, beans and some breads are important sources of iron.

Serve meals and snacks that help promote a healthy body and weight, and encourage physical activity. Children need food and the calories it contains for growth and normal development. Actual calorie needs of children will vary depending on body size, growth spurts and physical activity.

Because children have high nutrient needs, it's important to focus on foods that are good sources of nutrients. This doesn't mean, however, that children can't have desserts.

Encouraging children to be active also helps promote good health. Regular physical activity burns calories, helps with weight control, improves coordination, helps build muscles, and is important in preventing some chronic diseases. Children who are not active are at higher risk of becoming overweight. One of the best ways to help an overweight child grow into his or her weight is to encourage physical activity like playing games and going for walks. According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, children and adolescents should aim for at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity on most, preferably all, days of the week.

Serve plenty of grain products, vegetables, and fruits. Grains such as breads, cereals, pastas, and rice as well as vegetables and fruits add color and variety to the diet. These foods are also good sources of complex carbohydrates, dietary fiber, and a number of vitamins and minerals.

Encourage foods that are low in fat.

For most people, it is sensible to eat less fat, saturated fat and cholesterol. It is important

to often introduce children to foods that are low in fat, especially saturated and trans fats. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend keeping total fat intake between 30 and 35 percent of total calories for children 2 to 3 years of age and between 25 to 35 percent of calories for children and adolescents 4 to 18 years of age.

After age two, families should begin thinking about the amount of saturated fat and total fat that's in their child's diet. The fat in most foods contains a blend of saturated, polyunsaturated, monounsaturated fats, and sometimes trans fats. Saturated fats usually are solid at room temperature. Examples of foods that are high in saturated fats include animal products like meat and lard, and dairy products such as whole milk, cream and butter.

Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats are liquid at room temperature. Corn and safflower oils are good sources of polyunsaturated fats. Canola and olive oils are high in monounsaturated fats. Replacing solid, saturated fats with liquid, unsaturated ones will be healthier for you and your children.

Trans fats are unsaturated fats that have been modified to make them more solid at room temperature. While small amounts of trans fats occur naturally in meat and dairy products, most are created as a side effect of the partial hydrogenation of plant oils. Because trans fats are neither required nor beneficial for health, and in fact increase the risk of heart disease, health authorities recommend limiting the consumption of trans fats to trace levels.

Changes to reduce the level of fat in meals must be practical and acceptable. For example, if you're used to buying whole milk, buy a half gallon of whole and a half gallon of 2% milk and mix the two together. Slow change is more likely to be accepted and adjusted to than a dramatic change.

The amount of fat you use in meal preparation can easily be reduced without losing much of the food's appeal or flavor. For example, if a muffin recipe calls for 1 cup of oil, you can easily reduce the amount of oil to 3/4 cup without changing the flavor and quality of the end product.

Lowering the fat content also lowers the calories in meals. When fat is lowered in a meal, other foods such as grains, vegetables, and fruits may need to be added to replace lost calories.

Moderate the use of sugar and foods high in sugar. There are two main reasons to offer children sugar in moderation. First, sugars and foods high in sugar supply calories but may be limited in vitamins and minerals. Second, too much sugar can lead to tooth decay.

Baby bottle tooth decay, also known as nursing bottle syndrome, is characterized by rapid decay of the primary upper front teeth and some of the lower back molars. Baby bottle tooth decay is associated with inappropriate bottle feeding, such as giving infants a sweet pacifier or bottle containing milk, formula, or a sugary liquid when they go to bed. Decayed baby teeth affect mouth formation and the health of permanent teeth later on.

Serve salt and processed foods only in moderation. The preference for salty foods is learned. Teaching children to enjoy food without adding salt may help reduce problems with high blood pressure later in life. Most children actually prefer less salty food. Avoid adding salt to recipes when possible. Experiment with spices and the flavors of lemon or lime juice.

Children triple their weight during their first year, then add approximately one birth weight every year until they reach puberty. During this time, their rate of growth slows considerably, teeth erupt and motor skills develop.

Never force children to eat or finish everything on their plates and give children ample time to finish eating. Focus on the positive. Praise children for trying new foods or eating most of the food on their plates, rather than criticizing them when they don't eat.

Labels can assist meal planners in making more knowledgeable purchases based on the nutrient content of each food. Look for nutrient content claims such as "free," "low," or "reduced" on the front of the label to help identify foods that are low in calories, fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium.

More information on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans is available at www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines.

Salt is added during the processing and manufacturing of food products in the form of sodium. Some examples of foods that contain high amounts of salt are processed meats and cheeses, canned soups, salad dressings, and prepared frozen entrees and dinners. Look for sodium in the list of ingredients on a food's packaging as well as on the food label. You'll be surprised to learn just how much sodium is added to the foods we eat.

Planning Healthy Meals Using MyPyramid

MyPyramid is an outline of what to eat each day. It's not a rigid prescription, but a general guide that lets you choose and plan a healthful diet that's right for you and your family. The overall message of the Food Guide Pyramid is to select foods that together give you all the nutrients you need to maintain health without eating too many calories or too much fat.

MyPyramid is arranged with colored stripes radiating from the base to the top of the pyramid. Each stripe represents one of the five main food groups: grains, vegetables, fruits, milk, meat and beans. A thin line representing oils is also included. Some stripes are thicker than others and all are wider at the bottom, indicating that you should eat more of some foods and from some food groups than others. Each of the food groups provides some, but not all, of the nutrients you need. No one food group is more important than another - for good health, you need them all.

Food intake amounts are given in cups and ounces for a given total calorie level. For 2 to 3 year olds, 1,000 to 1,400 calories per day are recommended, depending on activity level. For 4 to 8 year olds, the recommended range is 1,200 to 1,800 calories. At the 1,200 calorie level, the daily amounts of food are: 4 ounces of grains,

1.5 cups vegetables, 1 cup fruit, 2 cups of milk and 3 ounce equivalents of meat or beans. For more information, go to <http://mypyramid.gov>.

Using MyPyramid in planning meals for preschool children will help ensure that they are getting a variety of foods and the right amounts from each food group. It also will help ensure that foods high in fat and added sugars are kept in moderation.

See fact sheet 9.306, *A Guide for Daily Food Choices*, for more information on the Food Guide Pyramid.

The Nutrition Facts Food Label

Now that we know how to plan healthy meals, how do we know that what we're buying is nutritious? The Nutrition Facts food label can help.

This label tells you the total calories in one serving of the food and the number of calories that are coming from fat. It also tells you about the different types of fats and carbohydrates in the food. It tells you about the vitamin A, vitamin C, iron and calcium content of the food; these are all nutrients that are important for children. The nutrition label tells you about the cholesterol, fiber and sodium in that food.

Labels can assist meal planners in making more knowledgeable purchases based on the nutrient content of each food. Look for nutrient content claims such as "free," "low," or "reduced" on the front of the label to help identify foods that are low in calories, fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium.

Take the time to read food labels. You can use labels to help you plan healthy meals and budget your intake of calories and fat over several days. For more information on the Nutrition Facts food label, see 9.365, *The New Food Label*.