

# Getting a good start

healthy eating from one to five



Public Health  
Agency

# Getting a good start

Every parent wants the best start in life for their children. One of the most important things you can do for your child is to ensure that he or she eats a wide variety of foods in the right amounts.

What children eat and drink during their early years can affect their health for many years to come. Encouraging children to develop good eating habits when they are young will also mean they are more likely to eat healthily as they grow up.

By the age of one your child will be joining in family meals. Between the ages of one and five years old, your child will be very active and will be growing and developing rapidly.

The information and advice in this leaflet is based on up-to-date scientific evidence and will help you ensure your child is getting a good start.



# Healthy eating from one to five



Healthy eating for young children is not the same as for adults.

Adults are encouraged to eat more fibre and less fat. This results in a diet that is lower in energy (calories) and more filling. However, this advice is not suitable for very young children as they have small stomachs and cannot eat large amounts of food at one time.

Children under the age of five need to eat small amounts of food regularly. This is best provided in three small meals every day (breakfast, lunch and tea/dinner) along with two or three nutritious snacks in between. Snacks between meals help to ensure that children of this age get all the nourishment they need. To prevent tooth decay, snacks and drinks between meals should be sugar-free where possible (for suggestions refer to pages 12 and 13).

From around two years old, your child will be able to follow the healthy eating guidelines, just like the rest of the family.

For good health, children need to eat a wide range of foods to help ensure that they get all the calories, protein, vitamins and minerals needed. This means eating a variety of foods from the five main food groups:

- potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates;
- fruit and vegetables;
- beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins;
- dairy and alternatives;
- oils and spreads.

# Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates



This food group includes a wide variety of foods, which are important sources of energy (calories). They also provide essential B vitamins, which are needed for growth and activity. For more information on vitamins, see page 15.

There are lots of foods to choose from in this group. Try to offer a wide variety so that your child gets used to trying new foods.

Choose from:

- boiled, mashed or baked potatoes (chips should be limited to once or twice a week);
- all types of bread, eg white, brown, wholemeal, wheaten, granary, multigrain, soda bread, potato bread, rolls, baps, chapattis, tortilla bread, pitta bread, naan bread;
- pasta, noodles and rice (varieties without added flavouring are lower in salt);
- breakfast cereals, eg Weetabix, Ready Brek, porridge oats, Corn Flakes, Rice Krispies. Try to avoid those with added sugar, honey or chocolate to help prevent tooth decay;
- plain or wheaten scones, plain pancakes, crumpets, bread muffins, oatcakes, savoury crackers, crispbreads.

Foods from this group also contain fibre, which is essential for healthy bowels. Try to include a variety of white, brown and wholegrain types. Offering only wholegrain varieties of these foods will fill your child up too quickly without providing all the nutrients and energy (calories) needed and may also cause constipation if your child is not drinking enough fluid. Remember to give your child regular drinks – refer to page 13 for more information on suitable drinks.

**Try to offer something from this group at every meal**

It is important to have at least one food from this group at each meal. For example, a small bowl of cereal for breakfast, bread used to make a sandwich at lunch/tea time, or the pasta part of a main dish for dinner time (also refer to the *Sample menu* page 11). The amount needed of these foods will vary between children, and may even vary from day to day. Be guided by your child's appetite but don't let them fill up on these foods alone. Small servings of most of these foods also make good snacks between meals. Avoid sugary spreads, including jam, honey, marmalade or chocolate spread as these are harmful to teeth.

### **Some snack ideas to try:**

- fingers of toast or crispbread with a thin spread of cream cheese, nut butter or hummus.;
- breakfast cereal (choose one without added sugar, honey or chocolate) with milk;
- small sandwiches with suitable sugar-free fillings (refer to page 13 for some suggestions);
- rice cakes or breadsticks (unsalted where possible).

It is better not to offer cereal bars or sweetened breads and pastries, eg pancakes, scones, fruit bread, malt loaf, brioche, croissants and Danish pastries as these contain a lot of sugar and/or fat and salt. Instead, try to offer plain snacks that are low in sugar, such as those listed above.



# Fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetables are important sources of vitamins (especially vitamin C) and fibre. Dark green vegetables also provide iron.

This group includes all fruit and vegetables. Frozen fruit and vegetables are just as good as fresh. Canned varieties and fruit pots are also useful - choose fruit in natural juice and vegetables without added sugar or salt. Dried fruit (which should be kept to mealtimes) and fruit juice are also good (counts as a maximum of one portion a day). Potatoes are not included in this group.

Health professionals recommend that we all eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day. For young children, this means a total of five 'child-sized' portions.

Examples of one child-sized portion are:

- $\frac{1}{2}$  apple or  $\frac{1}{2}$  pear or  $\frac{1}{2}$  banana or  $\frac{1}{2}$  orange;
- 1 tbsp fruit salad, tinned or stewed fruit;
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of strawberries or grapes;
- 1 tbsp cooked vegetables;
- 1 tbsp chopped raw or salad vegetables.





To meet this target, try to offer some fruit and/or vegetables at each meal and for between-meal snacks (see the *Sample menu* page 11).

Encourage your child to eat a variety of fruit and vegetables. Allow them to enjoy their favourites, but keep trying those they don't like so well in small amounts from time to time. Most children need to try new foods several times before they accept them.

If your child refuses to eat any vegetables, don't make a fuss. Children often enjoy them as part of other dishes, eg in soup or stew. Children who don't like vegetables may be happy to eat more fruit.

Young children are influenced by what they see around them - so try to show them that you enjoy fruit and vegetables!

### **Some ideas to try:**

- add frozen vegetables, eg peas or sweetcorn, to rice or pasta 3-4 minutes before the end of cooking;
- mix mashed carrots, parsnips or turnip with mashed potato;
- add extra vegetables to stews and casseroles;
- add chopped fresh fruit or fruit tinned in natural juice to yogurt;
- add stewed fruit, eg apple or plums to milk puddings;
- offer chunks of fruit and vegetables as a snack between meals.

**To reduce the risk of choking, cut up smaller fruits and vegetables like grapes and cherry tomatoes.**

**Try to include a total of 5 child-sized portions**

# Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins

These foods are excellent sources of protein, which is essential for growth and development. They also provide important vitamins and some are also a rich source of iron.

This group includes:

- beans and other pulses including lentils, chickpeas, baked beans, kidney beans, butter beans;
- fish, white fish, oily fish and shellfish (fresh, frozen or canned);
- eggs;
- meat and poultry, including beef, lamb, pork, chicken, turkey;
- nuts, finely chopped or ground or nut butter (unless there is a family history of allergy - see *A word about nuts* opposite);
- soya mince, textured vegetable protein (TVP), bean curd (tofu), Quorn.

Try to give at least two servings from this group each day (refer to the *Sample menu* page 11). To help ensure your child gets enough iron, try to include red meats at least twice a week. Also refer to the section on *Iron* on page 14.

Processed meat products like sausages, burgers and chicken nuggets, contain less protein and iron and more fat and salt, so try not to use these too often.

If your child is having a vegetarian or vegan diet, refer to page 16.



**Try to include at least 2 servings from this group each day**



## Some ideas to try:

- tuna, sweetcorn and pasta bake with sliced tomatoes;
  - lentil curry served with natural yogurt and boiled rice;
  - egg fried rice with veg;
  - pork pieces casserole with pineapple and peppers, with boiled rice;
  - chicken portions casserole with leeks and carrots, with mashed potatoes;
  - bolognese mince and spaghetti with green beans;
  - fish in white sauce or oven-baked fish in breadcrumbs with boiled potatoes and mixed vegetables;
- boiled ham with cabbage, champ and parsley sauce;
  - vegetable lasagne with peas;
  - cheese omelette with sliced tomatoes.

## A word about nuts

**Safety:** Whole nuts are unsuitable for children under five years because of the risk of choking.

**Nut allergy:** Products containing nuts are safe for most children. If there is a history of conditions such as asthma, eczema or hay fever in the family (ie parents, brothers or sisters), speak to your GP, health visitor or medical allergy specialist before giving nuts to the child for the first time.

**If you are concerned about your child's diet because of an allergy, ask your GP to refer you to your local Registered Dietitian.**

# Dairy and alternatives

Milk and foods made from it provide energy (calories), protein for growth and essential vitamins and minerals for strong bones.

This group includes milk and foods made from it, such as cheese and yogurt. It doesn't include butter or cream.

Try to offer at least 350ml of milk each day (but not more than 600ml). If your child does not like drinking milk, offering 2 or 3 portions of other foods from this group will be just as good. For example one portion is:


- 25g (1oz) of hard cheese; or
- 125g carton of unsweetened yogurt; or
- a bowl of milk pudding.

After the age of one, your child can take pasteurised whole and semi-skimmed goat's, sheep's and cow's milk to drink instead of infant formula milk or follow-on formula milk. If you are breastfeeding, you can continue to do so or else switch to cow's milk or one of the alternatives. By the age of one all drinks, apart from breastmilk, should be given from a cup and a feeding bottle should no longer be used (refer to *What about drinks?* page 13).

**Skimmed milk should not be given to children under five years. Soya formula should not be used unless your child is following a vegan diet or it has been recommended by your doctor.**

## Some ideas to try:

- grated cheese on spaghetti;
- white sauce with fish or chicken;
- melted cheese on toast;
- milk pudding, such as custard, rice pudding or semolina;
- yogurt poured over fresh fruit or fruit tinned in its own juice.



Try to offer at least 350ml of milk or 2 or 3 other servings from this group each day

# Oils and spreads

Getting enough healthy fats is essential for growth and development. Young children, in particular, need enough fat in their diet to help the brain and nervous system develop normally. The best fats to use are unsaturated oils and spreads such as rapeseed, olive or sunflower.



## Sample menu for one day

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| <b>Breakfast</b>   | Cereal with milk<br>Small cup of pure orange juice, well diluted (refer to <i>What about drinks?</i> page 13) |
| <b>Mid-morning</b> | Breadsticks with dip such as peanut butter or hummus  |
| <b>Lunch</b>       | Carrot and lentil soup with fingers of toast<br>Yogurt  |
| <b>Tea/dinner</b>  | Beef, carrot and turnip casserole served with boiled potato<br>1 kiwi fruit                                   |
| <b>Supper</b>      | 1 slice of toast with $\frac{1}{2}$ banana<br>Small cup of milk   |

# Snacks

Small snacks between meals are important for young children. The best snacks are those which are sugar-free or low in added sugar and packed with nutrients.

Foods and drinks which are high in sugar, eg sweets, biscuits, sweetened yogurts and desserts, can cause tooth decay. These foods are most damaging to teeth when they are taken between meals. This doesn't mean that they should never be taken, but they are less damaging to teeth if they are taken at the end of meals.

Try to offer a variety of snacks from the list below.



## **Fruit**

Offer chopped grapes, apples, bananas, pears, kiwi fruit and other seasonal fruits. Dried fruit is not recommended as a snack between meals as it contains concentrated sugar and may cause tooth decay. However, it can be included in main meals.

## **Raw vegetables**

Carrot, cucumber, celery and tomato can all be sliced up or cut into sticks to make handy nibbles.

## **Yogurt or fromage frais**

Chopped fruit (eg banana, apple or mandarin orange) can be added to

unsweetened yogurt or plain fromage frais. Fruit tinned in its own juice (rather than syrup) can also be used.

## **Bread-based snacks**

Choose from wheaten, wholemeal, white, granary or soda bread, French baguette, pitta bread, English muffins or potato bread.

## **Sandwiches**

Suitable fillings include banana, nut butter, hummus, cheese spread, egg, tomato, tuna and lean meat such as ham, chicken or turkey.

## **Cereal and milk**

Try the low sugar varieties, eg Weetabix, Cornflakes, Ready Brek, porridge.

# **What about drinks?**

By the age of one year all drinks (other than breastmilk) should be given from a cup and a feeding bottle should no longer be used. This is important as using a bottle can slow down your child's speech development and can also cause tooth decay, especially with sweetened drinks.

Milk or water are the recommended drinks for young children - pasteurised whole and semi-skimmed cow's milk can be given as a drink from one year, as can pasteurised sheep's and goat's milk.



Pure unsweetened fruit juice, well diluted (one part juice to ten parts water), can be taken at main meals, but is not recommended between meals.

Ordinary and diet varieties of squashes, juices and fizzy drinks or energy drinks are not recommended. If used, they should be kept to main meals. Squashes and juices should be well diluted.

Tea and coffee should not be given to children under five, as it reduces the absorption of iron from foods and can increase the risk of anaemia.

# Iron

Iron is essential for your child's health. Too little iron causes anaemia, which can affect your child's development.



Try to offer some foods that contain iron every day (see the boxes below). The best source of iron is from animal foods as it is in a form that can be easily used by the body.

A variety of other foods, eg vegetables and cereals are also useful sources of iron. The iron in these foods is not so easily used by the body, however taking a source of vitamin C (eg strawberries, tomatoes or unsweetened orange juice) at the same meal helps the absorption of iron.

Try to give your child red meat (beef, pork or lamb) at least twice a week. If your child doesn't eat any meat or fish, make sure you offer plenty of other sources of iron and add a good source of vitamin C.

## Best sources of iron

- Lean beef, lamb, pork
- Canned sardines, pilchards, mackerel, tuna
- Chicken or turkey, especially dark meat
- Liver and kidney

## Good sources of iron

(especially if taken with a food or drink rich in vitamin C)

- |   |                           |
|---|---------------------------|
| • Breakfast cereal with added iron (check the label)      | • Egg yolk                |
| • Peas, beans, lentils                                    | • Nuts and seeds          |
| • Dried fruit such as apricots, prunes, raisins, sultanas | • Tofu (bean curd)        |
|   | • Bread                   |
|   | • Broccoli, spring greens |

**If you are concerned about your child not having enough iron, you can ask your GP to refer you to your local Registered Dietitian for further advice.**

# Vitamins

Giving your child a wide variety of foods from the four main food groups outlined on pages 4-11 will help to ensure that your child gets all the vitamins needed for healthy growth and development.



Health professionals advise that all children at this age should be given a supplement of vitamins A, C and D, which should be continued until they are five years old. Ask your health visitor about this. For more information on vitamin D please see *Vitamin D and you* leaflet (scan the QR code).

Parents who have children under 4 years or women who are pregnant and on benefits or pregnant and under 18 are entitled to the Healthy Start vouchers. The free vouchers can be exchanged for milk, fruit, vegetables and infant formula. You can also get free vitamins. Visit [www.healthystart.nhs.uk](http://www.healthystart.nhs.uk) or ask a health professional for more information.



# Is your child vegetarian?

There are different types of vegetarian eating patterns. Most vegetarians eat milk and milk products, and some may eat eggs. Vegans eat no foods that come from animals.

Vegetarian or vegan diets can be healthy, providing that a wide variety of food is eaten. When meat and animal products are avoided, extra care will be needed to ensure that your child gets all the protein, vitamins, iron and other minerals needed. This is particularly important if your child is following a vegan diet.

Include some of the following choices every day:

- pulses, such as lentils, peas, beans, baked beans, butter beans, chick peas;
- bean curd (tofu);
- soya protein (TVP);
- Quorn;
- nuts, either finely chopped, ground or nut butters (unless there is a family history of allergy - see *A word about nuts* page 9).

Vitamin C helps the body absorb iron from these foods, so it is important to include fruit, vegetables or well diluted, unsweetened pure orange juice at mealtimes.

If your child is following a vegan diet, you should give unsweetened calcium-fortified milk alternatives such as soya milk, almond milk and oat milk from the age of one (check the label to make sure it contains at least 120mg of calcium per 100g).

It is more difficult for children following a vegan diet to get all the vitamins they need. Therefore, in addition to the vitamins mentioned on page 15, they should also be given supplements of vitamin B12 and riboflavin (another B vitamin).

You can obtain further information and advice from your health professional or by visiting:

[www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/how-to-eat-a-balanced-diet/the-vegetarian-diet/](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/how-to-eat-a-balanced-diet/the-vegetarian-diet/)

# A word about teeth

It's never too early to protect your child's teeth.

- Begin to brush baby teeth twice a day every day as soon as they appear in the mouth (brush last thing at night and on one other occasion), using a small smear of fluoridated toothpaste.
- For children 0 to 3 years old use a fluoridated toothpaste containing no less than 1,000 ppm fluoride. For children 3-6 years old use a pea size amount of fluoridated toothpaste containing more than 1,000 ppm fluoride.
- Children need to be supervised while brushing their teeth until the age of seven.
- Try not to offer foods and drinks that are high in sugar between meals, as this is when they are most damaging to teeth.
- Spit out after brushing and do not rinse, to maintain fluoride concentration levels.
- Register your baby with a dentist from the time the first tooth erupts (about 6 months of age) and continue to take them for dental examinations as regularly as your dentist recommends.



# Making the most of mealtimes

Mealtimes are social occasions, which provide children with opportunities to learn table manners and practice their language skills. Try the following suggestions to make the most of mealtimes.

- Try to eat together most days and sit at the table.
- Try to involve your child in preparing food and serving it, when it is safe to do so. Allow your child to help with laying and clearing the table.
- Encourage your child to try all foods offered, but never force a child to eat.
- Offer finger foods of all kinds, particularly fruit and vegetables, as this will encourage your child to feed him/herself and try out new foods.
- Try to use child-sized utensils and crockery, as this may make it easier for your child to learn to eat independently. This will be messy at first but it is important to allow your child to develop in this way.
- Make sure you allow enough time for your child to finish the meal or snack.
- Encourage good table manners.
- Try to avoid distractions such as television during meals and snacks.



# Fussy eaters

It is quite normal for a child to refuse a food occasionally. If your child refuses a snack or meal, gently encourage them to eat. If your child still refuses to eat, try the following suggestions.



- Remove the food without making a fuss and discard it. Don't offer alternatives - wait until the next meal or snack time before offering food again.
  - Try to keep relaxed, as this will help to ensure that your child enjoys meal and snack times rather than making them a battleground.
  - Offer small helpings to begin with. You can then offer second helpings if your child wants more.
  - Don't try to bribe children into eating food they don't want with the reward of a pudding or sweet snack.
- You may find it useful to take the attitude that a food refused is 'not liked today'. Just offer the food again a few days later, prepared in a different way, as this may be more acceptable.
  - Try to identify possible reasons for your child's food refusal - drinking continually throughout the day, or having frequent large snacks between meals can reduce the appetite for main meals.

**Never force a child to eat.**

**Ask your Health Visitor for more help and advice on feeding your child.**



See the Public Health Dietitians Group videos on nutrition in the early years at:  
[www.youtube.com/channel/UC\\_-f5E0ehqIR3z-cQdUvkCQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_-f5E0ehqIR3z-cQdUvkCQ)



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