

# Healthy choices

Choose wisely: advice for parents on nutrition and physical activity for primary school children







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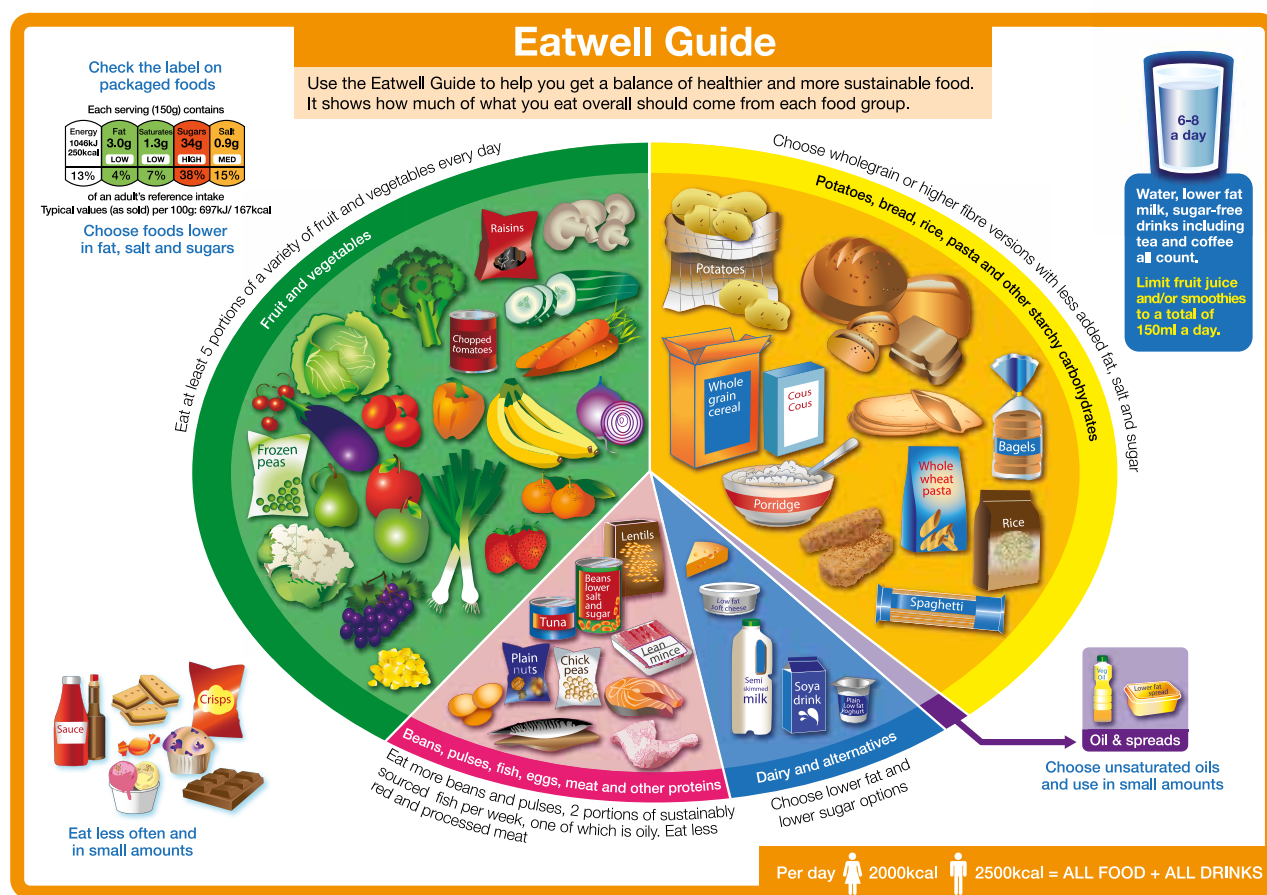
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# Healthy eating for primary school children

From the time your child starts school, they should be eating the same type of food as the rest of the family but in smaller quantities. Choosing a wide variety of food from the different food groups is the best way to make sure your family is getting all the nutrients they need to stay healthy.

## The Eatwell Guide

No single food provides all the nutrients we need, so it's important to eat a wide variety of foods. The Eatwell Guide below shows the different types of food we eat and the proportions we need to eat them in to achieve a healthy, balanced diet. The foods pictured on the bottom left are outside the main image as they are high in fat, salt and/or sugar and should be eaten less often and in small amounts.



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## Fruit and vegetables

These foods are rich in vitamins, minerals, and fibre and are low in fat. Aim to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day.

### Tips

- Offer lots of different types and colours of fruit and vegetables – aim to eat a rainbow of colours.
- Fresh, frozen, dried and canned fruit and vegetables all count towards the five-a-day target.
- Fruit and vegetables make excellent snacks.
- Vegetables can be added to most dishes including soups, casseroles, curries, bolognese, stews and used as toppings on pizza.
- Do not overcook fruit and vegetables as this will reduce the vitamin content.
- Unsweetened pure fruit juice is a good source of vitamin C but is high in natural sugar, and lower in fibre than eating whole pieces of fruit, so it's best taken only at main meal times when it is less likely to cause damage to teeth. Limit fruit/vegetable juices and smoothies to a combined total of 150ml a day. It can only count as one of your five-a-day.
- Dried fruits are a good source of nutrients and fibre but are high in natural sugars so can cause tooth decay. They are not recommended as a snack between meals but are best served as part of a main meal when they are less harmful to teeth.
- Help your child get their five-a-day by including some fruit or vegetables as a snack for morning break.
- If they take a packed lunch try to include two portions of fruit and vegetables (ideally one fruit and one vegetable). This includes all fresh fruit and vegetables and pots or tins of fruit in fruit juice, but not in syrup. Potatoes do not count towards the five-a-day target.
- Processed fruit bars (eg fruit winders, fruit flakes etc) are not recommended as they are high in sugar and can cause tooth decay.

### Some examples of one portion:

- 1 medium sized piece of fruit, eg apple, orange, banana, pear;
- 2 small fruits, eg kiwi fruits, satsumas, plums;
- 1 cup of grapes, cherries or berries;
- 1 large slice of pineapple or melon;
- 1 cereal bowl of salad, eg lettuce, tomatoes, cucumber and celery;
- 3 heaped tablespoons of vegetables, eg chopped or sliced carrots, peppers or sugar-snap peas;
- 3 heaped tablespoons of fruit salad (fresh or tinned in fruit juice).

For younger children (4–6 years), reduce these portion sizes by about half, then increase the amount as they grow. Older primary school children should be eating full portions.



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

This food group includes:

- boiled, mashed or baked potatoes/sweet potatoes;
- all types of bread, eg wholemeal, wheaten, granary, multigrain, white, brown, soda bread, potato bread, rolls, baps, chapatis, wraps, pittas;
- pasta, noodles, rice and couscous;
- breakfast cereals without added sugar, honey or chocolate, eg Weetabix, Ready Brek, porridge oats, Corn Flakes, Rice Krispies;
- crispbreads, savoury crackers, rice cakes, bread sticks.



These foods provide the body with energy, B vitamins and iron. Wholegrain cereals like Weetabix, Shredded Wheat, Bran Flakes or wholemeal varieties of bread, brown rice and pasta are higher in fibre, than white. Include at least one portion of foods from this food group at every meal. The foods within this food group also make healthy snacks, just remember not to top them with spreads or sauces high in fat and/or sugar (e.g. butter, jam, mayonnaise).

### Some examples of one portion:

- 2 adult handfuls breakfast cereal (30g);
- 1–2 slices of wholemeal or white bread;
- 2–3 tablespoons of cooked brown rice;
- 3 small boiled potatoes;
- 3 tablespoons of cooked wholemeal pasta.





## Dairy and alternatives

These foods provide protein, calcium, vitamin A and vitamin D. Calcium is very important for strong bones and teeth, especially for growing children. Foods high in calcium include: milk, yogurt, cheese, fromage frais and milk puddings.

Offer lower fat and sugar varieties of dairy foods such as semi-skimmed milk, low-fat or natural yogurt and fromage frais.

If your child does not like milk or dairy products, or cannot tolerate these foods, it is important to get advice from your doctor, school nurse or health visitor.

Pasteurised sheep and goat's milk can be offered to children from the age of one. Fortified unsweetened milk alternatives such as soya, oat or almond milks are rich in calcium, low in saturated fat and cholesterol-free and can be a good alternative to dairy products.



### **Aim to include three portions a day – some examples of one portion:**

- 1 glass of semi-skimmed milk (200ml);
- 1 matchbox size piece of cheese (30g);
- 2 triangles of spreadable cheese;
- 1 x 125g pot of low-fat yogurt;\*
- 1 small pot of reduced sugar custard or rice pudding.



\*Many yogurts contain high amounts of added sugar. Unsweetened options like natural or greek style yogurts are best. Or choose lower sugar options by comparing nutrition labels.



## Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other sources of protein

These foods provide the body with protein, iron and B vitamins.

### This food group includes:

- beans/lentils/tofu/dhal;
- fish, eg cod/whiting/haddock/salmon/trout/mackerel/sardines, fresh, tinned and frozen varieties all count;
- eggs;
- poultry, eg turkey/chicken;
- red meat, eg beef/pork/lamb.



Aim to include two portions a day from this group. Some examples of a portion include:

- 2 tablespoons hummus;
- 1-2 heaped tablespoons beans;
- 2 slices of cooked meat, chicken or turkey;
- 1-2 eggs (hard boiled, scrambled, poached, as an omelette);
- half a small can of tuna, salmon or mackerel.

Try to include fish twice a week, one of which should be oily, such as sardines, herring, salmon, trout or mackerel. Oily fish is an excellent source of omega-3 fatty acids, which are needed for brain development and have been shown to protect against heart disease in later life.



Processed meats like ham, sausages and chicken nuggets can be high in fat and salt. Try to use these less often.



## Oils and Spreads

Some fat is essential as it provides energy, essential fatty acids and fat soluble vitamins. However, it should be eaten in small amounts, for example:

- spread margarine thinly on bread or toast;
- only use small amounts of oil when cooking.

Good fats (unsaturated fats including both monounsaturated or polyunsaturated) are better for our health, so when using spreads and oils use the ones labelled high in mono or polyunsaturates such as olive oil, rapeseed oil, corn oil or sunflower oil.

## Eat less often and in small amounts

These foods are not required as part of a healthy well balanced diet. If giving these foods, try to give them less often and only in small amounts. Cakes, biscuits, chocolate, sweets, puddings, pastries, ice cream, jam, honey, crisps, sauces, butter, cream and mayonnaise are all high in fat, salt and/or sugar. Too many of these foods increase the risk of your child living with overweight or obesity, putting their health at risk. Try to look for healthier alternatives to these foods (see information on snacks on pages 12 and 13).



If you choose to offer sweet foods and or drinks:

- give small amounts of them at the end of a meal instead of between meals - sugary foods and drinks are most likely to cause tooth decay when they are taken between meals.
- avoid using them as rewards - instead try to encourage good behaviour using smiles, praise and positive attention (look at the Healthy choices reward chart on page 21).



## Healthy eating summary for primary school children

From five years of age, children should aim to eat the following every day:

- 5 or more portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables;
- a starchy food such as cereal at breakfast or potatoes, bread, rice or pasta at every other meal;
- 3 portions of lower fat dairy foods such as milk, cheese, yogurt, fromage frais;
- 2 portions of foods such as beans, pulses, lentils, fish, eggs or meat;
- less foods high in fat, sugar and salt.

**Eating a balanced diet with plenty of variety will provide all the nutrients needed for healthy growth and development.**

# Meal ideas

## Getting the balance right

One of the most important healthy eating messages for everyone is to eat regular balanced meals. We should aim to have three meals a day, and children may need one or two healthy snacks in between.

## Breakfast

Eating breakfast is really beneficial for children as research has shown that it improves concentration in school. Children who do not eat breakfast are more likely to eat less healthy snacks such as crisps, sweets or biscuits later in the morning.



### Try some of these breakfast suggestions:

- Wholegrain breakfast cereal with semi-skimmed milk. Add fresh, canned or dried fruit to cereal. This will help to meet the recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.
- Wholegrain, wholemeal or granary bread, toast, bagel, crumpet or muffin with a scraping of butter, spread or margarine.
- Porridge with semi-skimmed milk and a sprinkling of cinnamon or topped with a handful of berries, raisins or sliced banana.
- Beans, mushrooms or tomatoes on toast.
- Boiled, poached or scrambled egg with toast.

All of the above can be served with a glass of semi-skimmed milk or a small glass (150mls) of unsweetened fruit juice.



## Healthy lunches

Whether your child takes a packed lunch to school or has school dinner, it's important they choose a balanced meal to keep their energy levels up. A packed lunch should include a variety of foods from each of the main food groups.

### Try some of these packed lunch suggestions:

- Sandwich, wholemeal roll, pitta bread, bagel, wrap or other types of bread with a tasty filling, for example:
  - cheese and tomato;
  - canned salmon and cucumber;
  - egg and cress;
  - tuna and peppers;
  - cheese and sliced apple;
  - chicken and sweetcorn;
  - hummus and cherry tomatoes;
  - mashed chopped dates with apple.
- Rice, pasta, potato or couscous salad.
- Slices of homemade pizza, quiche or frittata.
- Low-fat soft cheese or hummus with bread and vegetable sticks.
- Vegetables can be used as part of the sandwich filling or included separately, eg cucumber, carrot, cherry tomatoes, celery sticks or peppers.
- Include fresh, canned or dried fruit.
- Remember to include a drink. The best drinks are water and milk.
- Although pure fruit juice contains some naturally occurring sugar, it is also suitable at meal times, when it is less likely to cause tooth decay. Limit fruit/vegetable juices and/or smoothies to a combined total of 150ml a day.
- Remember, children have small appetites, don't pack too much in. The key to success is variety.

### Keep it cool!

To make sure the lunch is safe to eat, remember to use a cool bag and pop in an ice pack.

For more ideas for packed lunches, refer to the leaflet *Are you packing a healthy lunch?* produced by the Public Health Agency (see [www.pha.site/packing-a-healthy-lunch](http://www.pha.site/packing-a-healthy-lunch) ).



## Are you packing a healthy lunch?



**school  
food**



## Tasty dinners

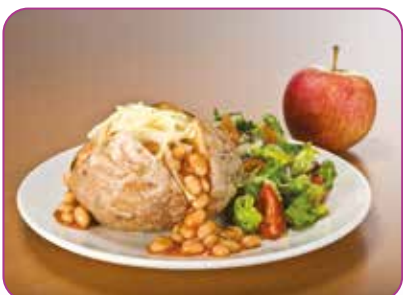
If your child has had a cooked lunch, you could use the packed lunch suggestions on some days to serve at dinner time. Try to sit down with your child while they eat. It is best to eat together as a family, as this allows time to chat and also gives you the opportunity to set a good example. Meal times should be sociable, happy occasions!



### Try some of these suggestions:

#### Main meals

- bean casserole with baked potato, mashed potato, rice or pasta;
- lentil and vegetable curry with naan bread;
- pasta and vegetables with a tomato based sauce topped with cheese;
- macaroni cheese with peas or sweetcorn;
- baked potatoes with low-fat cheese and chives, baked beans, grated cheese or cottage cheese and salad;
- readymade pizza base with a tomato based sauce, low-fat cheese and vegetable toppings such as peppers, onions and mushrooms;
- vegetable lasagne with salad;
- fish cakes with salad and crusty bread;
- fish pie with potato topping, sweetcorn and peas;
- tuna and pasta bake with vegetables;
- grilled fish fingers with potatoes and broccoli;
- salmon, baby boiled potatoes (with the skins on) and peas;
- kedgeree (a dish containing fish, boiled egg and boiled rice);
- chicken curry and brown rice;
- chicken and vegetable stir fry with noodles or brown rice;
- grilled low fat sausages, mashed potato and beans;
- spaghetti bolognese;
- shepherds pie with frozen veg.



## Delicious desserts

- low-fat, low-sugar yogurt with fresh fruit;
- stewed or canned fruit in natural juice with low-fat custard;
- fresh fruit salad with fromage frais;
- tinned pears in natural juice with low-fat rice pudding;
- fruit crumble and low-fat custard;
- sugar-free jelly and fruit.

## Healthy eating habits

To help children develop healthy eating habits, try to do as many of the following as possible:

- ✓ switch the television off when you are eating;
- ✓ sit together as a family to eat your meal;
- ✓ have a 'no phones at the table' rule for both parents and children;
- ✓ offer new foods – don't be discouraged if children don't like them straight away;
- ✓ encourage and praise good eating habits;
- ✓ involve your child in shopping for and preparing food;
- ✓ set a good example by eating healthy foods yourself and being positive about them.



# Snacks

Children may need one or two snacks every day, in addition to three balanced meals, so it makes sense to choose wisely. Healthy snacks can help boost intakes of vitamins, minerals and fibre, and keep energy levels up before the next meal. Less healthy choices provide calories but little nourishment, which can contribute to unwanted weight gain and obesity in children. Snacks that are high in sugar can also be harmful to teeth, especially when eaten between meals.

Many schools take part in healthy break schemes, which aim to encourage children to eat more fruit and vegetables, choose healthy drinks such as milk and water, and avoid snacks and drinks that are high in fat and/or sugar. If you provide a mid-morning snack for your child in school, try to make sure it meets the criteria set out by your school. For more information on healthy breaks, see the leaflet *Healthy breaks for schools - a guide for pupils and parents* produced by the Public Health Agency (see [www.pha.site/healthy-breaks-schools](http://www.pha.site/healthy-breaks-schools) )

**Foods listed below are the best choices for general and dental health as they are nutritious, low in sugar and most are low in fat and salt:**

- fresh fruit or pots or tins of fruit in natural juice;
- bite sized pieces of fresh fruit;
- vegetable sticks, eg carrots, celery, peppers, cucumber, baby sweetcorn on their own or with light soft cheese or hummus;
- bread or toast (preferably wholemeal, wholegrain or wheaten) served with a small amount of butter, margarine or a low-fat spread (without jam, honey or chocolate spread);
- pitta bread or a plain bagel served with a small amount of butter, margarine, low-fat spread or low-fat soft cheese;
- plain unsalted rice cakes;
- plain bread sticks;
- plain popcorn with a sprinkling of cinnamon;
- unsweetened cereals, eg Shredded Wheat, Weetabix, Ready Brek, porridge;
- sandwich made with low-fat filling, eg tomato, banana, tuna or chicken;
- homemade soup (not containing cream or stock cubes that are high in salt);
- low-fat plain yogurt or plain fromage frais.





Most of the foods below are nutritious but still contain some sugar, fat or salt. They are best taken at meals (when they are less damaging to teeth) and should not be taken too frequently as snacks between meals. Choose low-fat, low-sugar, low-salt varieties where possible.

**These foods should not be taken too frequently between meals:**

- sandwiches with cheese filling or processed meats like ham;
- crumpets spread thinly with unsaturated margarine or butter;
- processed breakfast cereals, eg Bran Flakes, Shreddies, Cornflakes, Rice Krispies;
- oatcakes;
- cheese and crackers;
- cubes of cheese.

**The foods below are the least healthy choices as most are high in sugar and may also be high in fat or salt or both. If eaten, they are best taken with a main meal and taken all at once rather than at intervals throughout the day:** (when taken all at once they are less damaging to teeth).

- chocolate, cream or jam filled biscuits;
- cake;
- scones;
- pancakes;
- brioches, croissants, Danish pastries or pain au chocolat;
- crisps;
- cereal bars;
- sweets;
- flavoured yogurts;
- dried fruit\*.

\*Dried fruit is high in sugar and is therefore not recommended between meals. If taken at meal times, dried fruit is less harmful to teeth and can help to meet the five portions a day target.

## Sweets and treats

Avoid using sweets, chocolate or crisps as rewards for good behaviour or achievement. Try non-food rewards instead such as having a friend to play, a trip to the park, going to the cinema or swimming (see the Healthy choices reward chart on page 21).

# Drinks

Children need to drink enough fluid to keep them well hydrated for general health and to aid concentration during the day. Drinking water and keeping hydrated throughout the day helps to increase children's alertness, making them more ready and able to learn at school. If children don't get enough fluid, they become dehydrated and their memory and concentration suffer. They can also feel groggy and irritable. This means that children should have free fresh drinking water available throughout the day.

Parents can set a good example by drinking wisely themselves. If your child sees you drinking sugary drinks throughout the day, it's likely they will want to do the same!

## Top tips for drinks

- Encourage your child to drink at least 6–8 glasses of fluid each day, some of these should be when they are in school.
- Choose water or semi-skimmed milk as the best options between meals. Tap water is free, convenient, calorie free and doesn't harm your teeth.
- More fluids are needed when the weather is warm and during activity.

## Go for these drinks between meals

- water, eg tap or bottled still water (unflavoured);
- semi-skimmed milk.

**Make drinks more appealing by using fun glasses, straws, ice cubes and fruit slices.**



## These drinks are best taken with meals

- pure fruit and vegetable juices, well-diluted squashes and smoothies (limit to a combined total of 150ml throughout the day);
- flavoured milk drinks.

## Drinks that should be avoided

- tea and coffee;
- fizzy, drinks - both sugar and diet varieties eg: cola or lemonade including caffeinated energy drinks eg: Red Bull, Monster, Boost.

These contain other stimulants or added sugar and are not suitable for children.

If sweetened and acidic drinks are being taken, the following can help prevent damage to teeth:

- avoid holding the drink in the mouth or swishing it about before swallowing;
- drink through a straw placed well to the back of the mouth;
- rinse the mouth out with water after taking sweet/acidic drinks;
- do not brush teeth for at least one hour after taking acidic drinks to avoid tooth erosion;
- remember to brush twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste.



# Looking after your child's teeth

- Brush teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste. From the age of three onwards it is recommended that the toothpaste should contain more than 1000ppm (parts per million) of fluoride. For children aged 7 and above toothpaste should contain 1350 to 1500ppm of fluoride. The level of fluoride can be found on the pack.
- Limit sweets and other sugary foods and drinks to meal times only.
- Offer water or semi-skimmed milk between meals.
- Avoid fizzy and sweetened drinks.
- Visit your dentist every six months (or as frequently as your dentist recommends).



## Tooth brushing guidelines

- Establish early tooth brushing habits.
- Tooth brushing should be carried out twice a day: last thing at night and on one other occasion to remove plaque, prevent tooth decay and prevent gum disease.
- Use a pea size amount of fluoride toothpaste on a dry toothbrush.
- Supervise children's tooth brushing until at least the age of seven.
- Encourage children to spit the toothpaste out after two minutes of brushing and not to rinse their mouths.
- Remember, prevention is better than cure.

# Maintaining a healthy weight

Just over one in four children and young people in Northern Ireland are living with overweight (20%) or obesity (6%). Children are getting heavier and that's bad news for their health now and in years to come. Children living with overweight and obesity are more likely to get diabetes or heart disease in later life and they can also be affected by more immediate consequences, including:

- teasing or bullying;
- low self-esteem;
- embarrassment when playing games or sports;
- difficulty in being active (eg getting breathless quickly).

Keep an eye on your child's weight. If you feel your child is living with overweight and you want to talk to someone about this, make an appointment with your school nurse or doctor. It is best to take action early to help your child to improve their eating habits and activity levels as this will help guide him/her on a lifelong path of eating well and being active.

Helping children to manage their weight requires a lot of support from other members of the family; try not to single your child out for any special treatment. Any changes you make should benefit the whole family. The best thing you can do to help your child develop healthy eating habits and be more active is to show them how it is done. Children who see their parents, grandparents and carers following a healthy lifestyle tend to learn by example.

## If your child is living with overweight or obesity

- The aim is to keep weight steady while your child continues to grow.
- Lifestyle change is the best approach and can be used for the whole family.
- Try to get the whole family to:
  - eat a balanced diet (see section on Healthy eating for primary school children from page 2).
  - become more active.
- Start by encouraging small changes such as swapping sugary fizzy drinks for water.
- Agree some goals together with your child so that they are involved.





## Try some of these suggestions

### Healthy eating

- Try to establish a routine:
  - eat three balanced meals a day, including breakfast;
  - include one to two healthy snacks in between if needed (see pages 12 and 13)
- Increase the amount and variety of fruit and vegetables, aiming for at least five portions every day.
- Introduce wholegrain cereals and bread.
- Use semi-skimmed milk.
- Check portion size, and reduce them if they are too large – remember children should eat smaller portions than an adult.
- Limit sweets, biscuits, crisps, chocolate and cakes.
- Use less spreading fat on bread and avoid adding to potatoes and vegetables.
- Avoid pies and pastries.
- Fry less often: instead air fry, grill, stew, boil, casserole or oven cook.
- Drink more water - aim to have a least 6–8 glasses a day.
- Limit fizzy and sweetened drinks.



### Activity


























- Encourage your child to be physically active for at least one hour each day. This does not need to be a continuous hour – it can be made up of several shorter periods of activity for at least 10 minutes each, eg playing in the park, walking to and home from school, using a dance mat or practising ball skills. A variety of activity is important to help your child develop strong bones, muscle strength and flexibility.
- Discourage long periods where your child is sitting still, eg watching TV, using the computer etc. Limit 'screen time' to two hours a day.
- Take regular family walks.
- Encourage walking or cycling to and from school.
- Encourage football in the park or take your child to the local playground.
- Go for a nature ramble.
- Try swimming, trampolining, badminton, tennis, netball or basketball.
- Join Rainbows, Brownies, Beavers, Cubs, Scouts etc.
- Arrange to go for walks with friends or family who have children.
- Learn to dance, eg disco, tap, Irish, ballet etc.
- Use a dance mat.
- Try family games such as hide and seek, rounders, quick cricket or touch rugby.





# Healthy choices reward chart

You can photocopy this page before you use it, so it can be used over and over again. Your child can write his or her name in the box above and colour a smiley face for each healthy choice each day. You can decide as a family how many smiley faces each week (eg total of 20 or more) will earn a healthy reward like a magazine, a trip to the cinema or a trip to the park at the weekend.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
<b>I ate breakfast today</b>					
<b>I ate at least 5 portions of fruit and veg today</b>					
<b>I had less than 2 hours' screen time today</b>					
<b>I got 60 minutes of physical activity today</b>					
<b>I brushed my teeth twice today</b>					
<b>Total</b>					

# Acknowledgements

This publication has been adapted from the original written by Amanda McLean, Practice Development Nurse, in partnership with the Community Nutrition and Dietetic Service, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSCT).

## Where to get help and support

If you need further advice, contact your school nurse or GP. If you need more specialist advice to help your child lose weight, ask your GP to refer you to see a registered dietitian.

### Further information is available at:

For more information on nutrition please visit the Public Health Dietitians YouTube channel.

[www.youtube.com/@publichealthdietitiansNI](https://www.youtube.com/@publichealthdietitiansNI)



Public Health Agency

[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

[www.choosetolivebetter.com](http://www.choosetolivebetter.com)

NI Direct

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/healthy-eating-children](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/healthy-eating-children)

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/physical-activity](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/physical-activity)

NHS Healthier Families

[www.nhs.uk/healthier-families](http://www.nhs.uk/healthier-families)

Safefood

[www.safefood.net/healthy-eating/children/school-children](http://www.safefood.net/healthy-eating/children/school-children)



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