

Healthy Eating for Children

By eating the right amount and type of foods, children can get the nutrients they need to grow and thrive. Healthy eating starts at the grocery store. Buy healthy, easily prepared food that your family enjoys.

→ **Serve small nutritious meals and snacks each day.**

Because preschoolers and young children have small stomachs, they need to eat small amounts of food more often throughout the day. Food servings can be divided up into smaller amounts and served throughout the day. For example, half a serving of meat and alternatives can be served at two different meals such as ½ cup of lentils at lunch and about 30 g (1 oz.) of chicken for dinner.

→ **Do not restrict nutritious foods because of their fat content. Children need healthy fats for proper development; however, some fats are much healthier than others.**

Healthy Fats:

1. **Monounsaturated fats.** The best sources of monounsaturated fats are found in extra virgin olive oil, avocados, nuts and seeds.
2. **Omega-3 fats** are extremely good for you! The best sources of omega-3 fats are found in deep-sea fish: mackerel, wild salmon, herring, anchovy and sardines. Some plant-based oils contain the pre-cursor to omega-3 fats, which our bodies can convert into omega-3: ground flaxseeds, canola, walnuts and a range of dark green leafy vegetables. In addition, there are higher levels of omega-3 fats in free-range meats and eggs because these animals eat green grass, rather than grains.

Unhealthy Fats:

1. **Saturated Fats** are solid at room temperature and are found in meat and also in fried foods, dairy products, eggs, palm oil and coconut oil. The foods with the most saturated fat are butter, cream, cheese and fatty cuts of meat.
2. **Hydrogenated Fats** are processed fats used in commercial goods such as crackers, chips, cookies, muffins, and margarines. While hydrogenation does not make the fat completely saturated, it creates **Trans Fats**, which act like saturated fats. Evidence is accumulating to implicate the harmful nature of trans fats in both cancer and heart disease. Avoid all food whose ingredients include partially hydrogenated or hydrogenated oils.

Offer a variety of nutritious foods, including some choices that contain fat such as deep sea fish, nuts, almond butter, tahini, olive oil and avocado.

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➔ **Respect your children's ability to determine how much food to eat.**

While parents and caregivers determine the selection of foods offered, young children can determine how much food they need. Avoid asking children to eat “just one more bite” or clean their plate. It is important to let children stay in tune with their own feeling of satiety and not to eat food just because it is there. Also, avoid telling children that in order to get dessert, they need to finish dinner. We don't want to bribe or reward children with desserts and sweet treats because it can pave the way to using desserts as comfort foods which increases the risk for obesity later in life.

It is important that a child is eating adequate servings of food over the day, but remember that “force-feeding” can often have the opposite effect and make a child even less willing to eat. Don't let meal times become a power struggle. Serve nutritious foods and let your child decide which types of food and the amount of each food to eat. Don't be alarmed if your child eats food from one food group for a couple of days. Keep offering them alternatives but trust their instincts. Avoid watching expectantly while your child eats and talking constantly about eating.

Most children prefer meals and snacks on a regular schedule and in familiar surroundings. The amount of food eaten at each meal and snack will vary day-to-day depending on the child's appetite, activity level and whether they are experiencing a growth spurt. Their appetite may also fluctuate when they are excited or overly tired. Also, it is quite normal to see children lose interest in any activity in a short time, including at mealtimes. When hungry, young children will focus on eating. When satisfied, their attention turns elsewhere.

Over time, the variations in the amount a child eats tend to average out to provide the calories and nutrients needed. This is especially true if the child is encouraged to eat healthy foods when hungry and to stop when full. Eating a variety of foods, especially vegetables and fruits, and including healthy fats is the best way to make sure that children get the nutrients they need.

➔ **Be a good role model.**

Be a role model for healthy eating. Start by having meals together as a family as often as possible. Turn off the TV. Set a good example. If your child sees you eating your vegetables - he/she will be more likely to eat them too!

Healthy Eating for Children

→ Educate your child about healthy food.

Sometimes we are wary of telling a child something is healthy because we fear they may reject it. Educate your child about why you are making these new food choices and present healthy foods in a positive way by telling your child how delicious they are!

→ Be patient.

If an unfamiliar food is rejected the first time, it can be offered again later. The more often children are exposed to a new food the more likely they are to accept it. It can take up to seven or eight exposures to a food before a child will try it. Encourage a child who dislikes vegetables to eat them by calling them something more descriptive and fun. For example, if the child is interested in colours, have the child eat the "green balls" (peas) and "orange circles" (carrots) from a bowl of mixed vegetables. If the child is interested in numbers, count the number of peas or carrots in a spoonful before giving it to the child.

→ Satisfy thirst with water.

Encourage young children to drink water to quench their thirst and replenish body fluids. Limit juice to 4-8 oz/day. A child who gets most of their calories from liquids will eat fewer solid nutritious foods. It is healthier to choose vegetables and fruit more often than juice, because although there is water in juice, there is also a large amount of sugar.

→ Let your child be part of food preparation and decision making.

Give your child some options so that they can decide what to eat. This way, they'll be much more interested in eating it. But make sure you *only offer healthy options!* For example, ask, "Do you want broccoli, carrots or sweet peas for dinner?" Don't simply ask, "what do you want for dinner?"

Then let them be part of food preparation. For example, spreading almond butter on apple slices or pulling apart the broccoli.

→ Grow food with your children.

Have fun and help them learn the difference between whole and processed food. If outdoor space is limited, you can grow strawberries, green peas, green beans or tomatoes in pots. If you have room in the garden, you can grow carrots, potatoes, pumpkins, raspberries, beets, etc.

Breakfast Suggestions

- Blended smoothie with soy, almond or rice milk and fruit (may also add protein powder)
- Almond butter on toast (use a wheat-free bread like rye, spelt, rice, or kamut)
- Omelet made with lots of veggies
- Poached eggs
- Low-sugar cereal (ancient grain, kamut, muesli) with milk (try rice, almond or soy milk) and nuts/seeds and fruit
- Whole rolled oats cooked with berries
- Homemade apple sauce
- Baked acorn squash or sweet potato

Snack Suggestions

- Fresh whole fruit
- Raw, unsalted nuts and seeds (Almonds, hazelnuts, cashews, walnuts, sesame seeds, pumpkin seeds)
- Fruit smoothie
- Yogurt (organic unflavoured is best and you can add a little honey, real vanilla extract or berries to add some variety)
- Cottage cheese
- Dried fruit such as apricots, prunes, cranberries or raisins
- Fruit with nut butter (such as almond butter)
- Rice cakes, oat cakes or rye crackers with avocado, almond butter, tahini, alfalfa sprouts and cucumber slices, sardines, hummus
- Vegetable sticks dipped in tahini, almond butter or hummus
- Air-popped popcorn with olive oil or flax oil and salt

Lunch and Supper Suggestions

- Salmon fillet with mixed green salad
- Open-faced egg sandwich with salad
- Chicken burger (1/2 the bun – use multigrain bread)
- Grilled fish and veggies with rice
- Lean meat, steamed veggies and small potatoes
- Stir-fry with lots of vegetables and brown rice. Add chicken, turkey or tofu for protein.
- Pasta dishes with lots of veggies and less pasta and meat (use whole wheat, kamut or brown rice pasta)
- Beans (chick peas, black beans, kidney beans, lima beans, lentils, white beans, etc) and veggies. Toddlers love mixed bean salad – make your own with a can of rinsed mixed beans, and a little vinegar and honey as a dressing.