

Food For Toddlers

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By the age of 12 months your child should be joining in family meals. Eating well helps them grow and develop properly.

Offering a varied and balanced diet should ensure they get all the nutrients they need. Meal times are social occasions, providing children with opportunities to practice their language skills, learn table manners and taking turns.

Many families are very busy and have many pressures but: Try to eat together most days and sit at a table.

- Offer finger foods of all kinds. This will encourage trying out new foods and the child will learn to feed themselves.
- Make sure you allow enough time for your child to finish their meal because they take longer than adults.
- Try to avoid distractions such as television during meals and snacks.

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.

Toddlers and small children have the same nutritional needs as adults; energy, protein, carbohydrates, fat, vitamins and minerals, but need them in a different way.

Healthy Eating for Toddlers

Children under the age of five years need to eat small amounts of food regularly. This is best provided in three small meals every day, breakfast, lunch and tea/dinner, with two or three nutritious snacks in between. Snacks between meals helps to ensure that children of this age get all the nourishment they need, as their energy and iron requirements are higher.

Food Groups

If you give your child a variety of foods from each of the following four food groups, they should get all the nutrients they need.

1. Meat, Fish and Alternatives:

- Red meat such as minced beef, lamb.
- Poultry such as chicken or turkey.
- Fish, eggs, lentils and peas, or food made from tofu or soya mince.
- Textured Vegetable Protein (soya-based vegetarian alternative) should not be given to a child under three years as it is difficult to digest.
- Nuts (whole nuts and seeds should not be given to children under five years). Use ground nuts or peanut butter instead, unless there is a history of nut allergy.

These foods are excellent sources of protein, essential for growth and development, and they also provide important vitamins. Some are a rich source of iron. Try to give at least two servings from this group a day.

2. Milk and Other Dairy Foods

Cow's milk, yoghurt, cheese and fromage frais. These foods are a good source of calcium helping to make strong bones and teeth. Full cream milk should be given up to 2 years and then semi-skimmed milk until five years. Full skimmed milk does not contain enough vitamins or calories. Try and offer at least 350 ml of milk daily, but not more than 600 ml of milk daily.

If your toddler does not like drinking milk, give at least two to three servings a day of yoghurt, cheese, fromage frais, milk-based puddings or other sources of milk.

3. Bread, Rice, Pasta, Noodles, Breakfast Cereals, Potatoes, Yams, Sweet Potatoes, Couscous and Chapattis.

These starchy foods provide calories, vitamins, minerals and fibre. They are a good source of energy, so give your child at least one serving with each meal.

4. Fruit and Vegetables

These include fresh, frozen, dried or fruit juice. Tinned fruits or vegetables are higher in sugar and salt. These foods are a good source of vitamins and fibre. Dark green vegetables also provide iron.

Try to give a mix of fruit and vegetables including different colours. Vegetables can often be refused at this age. However, keep offering them and try to make them fun, or mash different types together or add to different dishes. Some children like raw vegetables such as carrots and celery.

Fats and Sugars

Sweets, chocolate, biscuits, cakes, ice cream, puddings and sugary drinks. These foods are high in fat and sugar and provide energy (calories) but few other nutrients. Do not offer in place of foods from the four main food groups. Try to limit sugar and sugary food due to tooth decay.

Why Do Children Need Healthy Snacks?

Young children have small appetites but high nutrient needs and they sometimes need re-fuelling between meals. Offer healthy and nutritious snacks, for example fruit, raw vegetables, yoghurt, mini sandwiches, bread sticks, crumpets, cereal with milk, plain popcorn, crackers or rice cakes.

What About Drinks?

From the age of 12 months all drinks should be offered in a cup. Milk and water are the best drinks to give your child as they cause least harm to teeth. All drinks containing sugar, for example fruit squash, flavoured milk and fruit juice can cause tooth decay.

Fizzy drinks are not recommended for children due to high levels of sugar, caffeine and additives, such as saccharin. High intake of sugary drinks may cause diarrhoea, reduced appetite and other health problems. If you are offering juice, offer pure unsweetened fruit juice well diluted (10 parts water to one part juice). This can be taken at main meals, but is not recommended between meals.

Tea and coffee are not suitable for children under 5 years:

- Coffee and tea have high levels of caffeine.
- Tea should not be given to children under five as it reduces absorption of iron from foods and can increase the risk of anaemia.

What about Iron?

Iron is needed for good health – it is used to make red blood cells and enables your child to grow and develop properly. Too little iron causes anaemia, which can affect your child's development.

Best Sources of Iron

Red meat; beef, lamb or pork, liver or liver pate, chicken or turkey, fish; sardines, pilchards, mackerel and tuna.

Good Sources of Iron

Peas, beans, lentils, chickpeas, dahl, dark green vegetables, fortified cereals, dried fruits such as raisins, prunes, apricots and sultanas. Vitamin C helps the absorption of iron. A drink of diluted fruit juice at mealtimes helps with the absorption of iron.

What About a Vegetarian Diet?

Vegetarian or vegan diets can be healthy, providing a wide variety of foods are eaten. When meat and animal products are excluded, extra care is needed to ensure that your child gets all the protein, vitamins, iron and other minerals needed. Giving nutrient rich foods like milk, cheese and eggs will help to ensure that their diet is not too bulky and that they get plenty of protein, vitamin A, calcium and zinc.

What About Vitamins?

As it is difficult to know whether your child eats a varied diet, a daily supplement of vitamin A, D and C is recommended to be given to all children until they are five years old.

What About a Low Fat Diet?

Some people think that small children need a low fat diet, just like adults - this is not so. Children under the age of 2 need fat in their diet to provide energy and some vitamins that are only found in fat.

What About a High Fibre Diet?

It is not recommended to give babies and toddlers a high fibre diet, as the diet is quite bulky and can stop important minerals like calcium and iron from being absorbed. It also fills them up and less food is eaten from the important food groups.

Salt

Babies should not have salt added to their food, as their kidneys cannot cope with it. Children under 3 years should have a maximum of 2g (0.8g sodium) but it is better to have less.

Sources: Food Standards Agency

Health Standards Agency

Department of Health