

CHILDREN'S NUTRITION GUIDELINES

Having a basic understanding of nutritional needs and eating behaviors is especially important for parents of young children. Because of our society's eating habits, children today are at a higher risk for developing heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure. Childhood obesity is increasing. The habits formed in these early years will influence health later in life.

Babies

- Breast milk is the best food for human babies. Iron-fortified infant formulas are an acceptable substitute if a mother chooses not to breast feed. Never feed cow's milk to an infant. Most health providers suggest waiting until age 1 to introduce cow's milk, and to begin with whole milk.
- Never prop a bottle for an infant. This poses a choking hazard and can contribute to dental cavities as well as denying the baby the bonding and learning experiences of being held while fed.
- Babies have a tongue thrust reflex that causes them to push anything introduced into the front of the mouth out again with the tongue. They do not begin to lose this reflex until 4 - 6 months of age. That is why most health care providers suggest waiting to start solids until 6 months of age. Never enlarge the nipple of a bottle and use it for solids. This is a choking hazard.
- Introduce solids gradually, according to your health care provider's directions. Feeding only one new food every two to three days will help you spot potential food allergies.
- Follow your health care provider's directions on what foods to avoid feeding infants and for how long. For instance, honey should not be given to infants under 2 years of age.
- Each child is unique in maturation and development. Soft finger foods can be introduced at about 9 months of age if you think your child is ready.
- Babies do not need added salt, sugar or other flavorings in their foods.
- Always supervise children while they are eating! Choking is known as the "silent killer" because you will not hear a child who is choking. Teach children to eat in the high chair, at the table, or sitting down. This can also reduce the risk of choking.

- Avoid putting infants to bed with a bottle. This can result in a condition known as "Baby Bottle Syndrome" which results when the sugars in the milk or juice bottle pool around the teeth during sleep and cause decay of the primary teeth.
- Minimize the amount of juice given to children. Giving juice from a bottle is discouraged because of the tendency for children to attach to the bottle, and the negative effect of the sugary juice pooling around the teeth, causing decay. Sugary juices reduce the child's appetite for other foods.
- Instead, teach your child to drink water from a cup. Start with a sippy cup, and work towards teaching your child to drink from an open cup or using a soft straw. Prolonged use of sippy cups can lead to tooth decay.
- It is normal for older infants to play with their food.

Toddlers

- Don't be surprised if, between the ages of 12 and 18 months, your toddler's appetite decreases considerably. The average baby triples his or her birth weight in the first year of life. This is the most significant growth period of life! We obviously can't continue to triple our weight every year. Also, toddlers are walking, running and climbing which burns more calories and causes growth to slow. With all the learning a toddler has to do, he or she may not have time to sit still long at mealtime.
- Be prepared for toddler pickiness and food jags. As their taste buds mature, toddlers often develop strong preferences for some foods and food textures, and totally reject others. They may eat food from only one food group for a week or two, and then move on to something else. They may eat a huge breakfast and then hardly eat the rest of the day.
- Even if the toddler rejects certain foods, continue to serve them in small amounts on the plate. It is typical for a toddler to refuse a food one week and enjoy it the next week or month.
- Because of their insatiable curiosity and need to perfect skills, toddlers may only sit and eat long enough to satisfy their immediate hunger pangs. You may want to consider serving several smaller meals or supplementing with nutritious snacks.
- Avoid feeding too much juice. Juice may give your toddler the feeling of fullness, causing him or her to eat less solid foods needed for energy and growth. Sugary juices, even 100 percent fruit juices, contain sugars that can harm developing teeth. Always give juice in a cup, not a bottle. Teach your toddler to drink water when thirsty.

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- Toddlers are trying out their new-found independence. They may insist on feeding themselves. They may also want to get their own snacks from the refrigerator.
- It is normal for toddlers to play with their food.
- Try to include your toddler at the table for a family meal whenever possible.
- Remember that even though toddlers seem to be fussy or light eaters, research has shown that if they are offered a variety of nutritious food throughout the day, they usually eat a fairly well-balanced diet.
- Avoid soda, chocolate, candy in excess, foods high in sodium, fast food, and snack foods that have more entertainment value than nutrition. Don't fall into the trap of trying to please your child by purchasing these foods.
- Toddlers need fat in their diets for physical growth and brain development. Unless it has been prescribed by a health care provider, toddler diets are usually not fat-restricted. After the age of two, children can follow the same heart-healthy diet as adults (e.g., skim milk)
- Common food choking hazards for toddlers include nuts, grapes (should be cut in half), popcorn, hard candy, hot dogs cut in "coin-shaped" pieces, raw vegetables in large chunks, large marshmallows, and any food in small, hard pieces. Always supervise your toddler while he or she is eating!

General Eating Guidelines

- Make mealtime a pleasant time for young children. Sit down as a family whenever possible. Talk about the foods being served, how they help us stay healthy, how they taste, etc. Ask children to share highlights of their day. Mealtimes that are unpleasant and stressful can lead to eating problems later.
- Turn off the television and put screens away during mealtime. Watching TV while eating encourages the bad habit of associating food with entertainment.
- Never use food as a reward (if you eat your beans, you can have ice cream) or as a punishment (if you don't taste that, you will stay in your room the rest of the evening). Avoid using food as a form of approval. By saying "you are a good boy for eating three pancakes" you give the message that eating —even overeating— is a way to get attention

and feel good. Minimize food rewards.

- As an adult, you are responsible for the food that comes into your house. Your child is responsible for the food he or she eats. You can't force a child to eat. You can only influence eating by the food you have available.
- If your child refuses to eat, be matter-of-fact. Give him or her a chance to have a small snack in an hour or two, as long as it is nutritious.
- Let your child help purchase and prepare foods. This may increase the chances of him or her eating the food. Be sure to use safety precautions in the kitchen!
- Get rid of the "clean your plate" rule. This encourages overeating and eating when not hungry; both are habits that can contribute to obesity. Remember, even when a child asks for more, he or she may not be able to judge how soon he or she will feel full, and may not be able to finish it.
- Watch portion sizes. A serving for a child is much smaller than a serving for an adult. Children have smaller stomachs. A good rule of thumb is one tablespoon of food per year of age of the child. For a two-year-old, two tablespoons of mashed potatoes would be a serving. Some children will eat more than that, however.
- Exercise is part of good nutrition! Help your young child get plenty of physical exercise every day. Exercise as a family if possible.
- Use fast-food in moderation. When you do eat fast food, have children order milk instead of soda, and bring fresh fruit or veggies from home.
- Avoid caffeine and artificial sweeteners for children.
- Use whole grain cereals, breads and grains.
- For more information on healthy eating, visit myplate.com or AveraChildrens.org to find our feeding guides for healthy infants and young children.
- Provide balance and variety in your menus.
- Be a good food role model. One seldom finds a child with better eating habits than his or her parents!

For more parenting information,
contact the Family Life Education
Office at 605-322-3660.