

Healthy eating

feeding your growing child

giving your
child a healthy
balanced diet



Food
Standards
Agency
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Around the time your child starts school, he or she will suddenly start growing very quickly and becoming more active. Children need a lot more energy and nutrients for their body size than adults. This booklet contains practical advice to help you make some healthy food choices for your growing child.

Q What should my child be eating?

A Children need a healthy balanced diet rich in fruit, vegetables and starchy foods, such as pasta, rice and potatoes. Encourage your child to choose a variety of foods to help make sure they get the wide range of nutrients they need to stay healthy.

Remember to include these sorts of foods:

- Milk, cheese, yoghurt, soya beans and nuts – these are rich in calcium, which is needed for healthy bones and teeth.
- Fortified breakfast cereals, margarine and oily fish – these are good sources of vitamin D, which helps ensure a good supply of calcium in the blood and therefore healthy bones. The main source of vitamin D is from the action of sunlight on the skin, but remember to avoid strong sun, especially around midday when there is a risk of burning.



- Meat, particularly red meat, is a rich source of iron. Pulses (beans and lentils), green vegetables and fortified breakfast cereals are also good sources of iron. Iron is needed for healthy blood and research shows that some children, particularly older girls, are not getting enough iron.
- Fish, because fish is a good source of protein, vitamins and minerals and it is low in saturated fat. Oily fish, such as mackerel, salmon and sardines, also contain omega 3 fatty acids. Aim for at least two portions of fish a week. You can give boys up to four portions of oily fish a week, but it's best to give girls no more than two portions of oily fish a week. This is because oily fish can contain low levels of pollutants that can build up in the body over the years. For girls, in the future, this could affect the development of an unborn baby.

Avoid giving children shark, swordfish and marlin because these fish contain relatively high levels of mercury, which might affect a child's developing nervous system.

- Citrus fruit (such as oranges and lemons), tomatoes and potatoes – these are all good sources of vitamin C, which is essential for health. Vitamin C might also help the body to absorb iron, so it's a good idea to give your child some food or drink containing vitamin C, such as a glass of fruit juice, at the same time as an iron-rich meal.
- Milk, margarine with added vitamins, green leafy vegetables and carrots – these are all good sources of vitamin A, which is important for good vision and healthy skin.



Fruit and veg

We should all be eating at least five portions of a variety of fruit and veg every day.

Try giving your child fruit and veg as snacks between meals, as well as part of main meals.

Include salad and vegetable sticks (such as carrots, celery, cucumber and pepper) in your child's packed lunch.

Give your child fresh fruit or some chopped fruit salad.

Dried fruit, such as raisins or dried apricots, can be a good extra for a packed lunch. But the sugar in dried fruit can damage teeth, so it's best not to eat it frequently between meals.

Sweets and snack foods

Eating sweet and sticky foods frequently between meals causes dental decay. Snack foods, such as cakes, biscuits, chocolate and sweets, are often high in sugar and saturated fat, and low in vitamins and minerals. So if your child does eat these sorts of foods:

- try to make sure they only eat them occasionally, you could pick a weekly 'sweet day' as a time when your child is allowed to eat sweets
- check the label and choose the option lower in fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt
- help and encourage your child to clean their teeth twice a day

Q How much salt should my child be having?

A Some salt is found naturally in most foods so there is no need to add salt to your child's food. If you're buying processed foods, such as pizzas, pre-packed sandwiches, soups, sauces or ready meals, even those aimed at children, remember to check the information given on the labels to choose those with less sodium (because it's actually the sodium in salt that can lead to health problems).

It's important for children not to have too much salt because this could affect their health in the future. The maximum amount of salt children should be having varies according to how old they are:

- 4 to 6 years – no more than 3g a day (1.2g sodium)
- 7 to 10 years – no more than 5g a day (2g sodium)
- 11 years upwards – no more than 6g a day (2.4g sodium)

Many snack foods are very high in salt. Here are some healthy low-salt snacks you could choose instead:

- fresh fruit
- sticks of crunchy vegetables
- unsalted nuts – but don't give these to children under five because of the risk of choking

Some foods, such as sausages, sauces, cheese and bacon are high in salt, so try to limit the amount of these sorts of foods you give to your child.



Q My child is overweight. Is dieting the answer?

A If you are concerned about your child's weight, consult your GP before starting any sort of diet.

However, if you encourage your child to eat a healthy balanced diet, with only small amounts of foods containing sugar and fat, and encourage your child to get plenty of physical activity, this will help them lose any excess weight or maintain a healthy weight.

Food allergies

If you have been told that your child has a food allergy or food intolerance and they need to avoid certain foods, it's important to make sure they are still getting all the nutrients they need.

If you are concerned about your child's diet, it's a good idea to talk to a dietitian, who can advise you how your child can avoid the foods they are sensitive to but still have a healthy diet. Remember, don't cut out food groups from your child's diet without medical advice.



Q How can I encourage my child to eat school meals?

A It's important your child has a nutritious, balanced meal to give them the energy they need for the day. School meals are getting healthier and caterers are being encouraged to use more nutritious recipes and more raw ingredients to provide freshly cooked meals, this should mean better choices for your child. If your child has school dinners, talk to them about what they eat and try to encourage them to vary their meals.

Q How can I make sure my child has a healthy packed lunch?

A Eating a variety of foods is important for a balanced diet. But it can sometimes be difficult to make packed lunches varied, interesting and healthy.

About one third of our diet should be made up of starchy foods like bread. Sandwiches are a popular choice for packed lunches. For a healthier option, make sandwiches with thickly sliced bread or rolls, and choose wholemeal varieties.

Healthier sandwich fillings include lean meats such as chicken or turkey without the skin, fish such as tuna, cottage cheese, edam or mozzarella and mashed banana. Include plenty of salad, but go easy on the mayonnaise, which is high in fat.

For variety, you could use different types of bread such as bagels, pitta bread or chapatti. Here are some other starchy foods you could use in a packed lunch:



- pasta
- rice or potato salad
- breadsticks or crackers
- homemade plain popcorn
- malt loaf with a scraping of spread

Remember to include some fruit in the packed lunch and, for extra calcium and protein, you could add a pot of yoghurt or fromage frais.

Some schools let children keep their packed lunches in a fridge at school, which is ideal. If this isn't possible, you could use freezer blocks or gel packs, or freeze a carton of fruit juice and use that to keep the food cool and safe – the juice will have defrosted by lunchtime.

Vegetarian diets

If you're giving your child a vegetarian diet, it's important to make sure their diet is balanced. You will need to be especially careful that your child gets enough protein and iron, so make sure you:

- include good sources of protein such as eggs, milk, cheese and pulses (for example lentils and beans)
- include good sources of iron, such as wholegrain breakfast cereals, green vegetables (such as spinach and watercress), pulses and dried apricots or figs. Remember, it might be easier to absorb iron if we have food or drink containing vitamin C at the same time as iron-rich food

Also avoid giving your child tea at mealtimes because it might reduce the amount of iron they can absorb.

Q What about fruit juices and drinks?

- A The best drinks to give children are water, milk and milkshakes without added sugar.

Children usually like fruit juice and it contains valuable vitamins, especially vitamin C. It can also count as one portion a day towards the five daily portions of fruit and veg that we should all be eating.

But when juice is extracted from the whole fruit, this releases sugar that can damage teeth, especially if your children sip it from a bottle or drink it frequently. So try to keep fruit juice to mealtimes, because this is better for teeth than drinking it between meals.

Lots of squashes, juice drinks, fizzy sugary drinks, flavoured milks and milkshakes contain added sugar, which is also bad for teeth.

You can find out more about food at eatwell.gov.uk





eatwell.gov.uk/child

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visit the Food Standards Agency's websites:

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