

Food Fact Sheet: Healthy eating for children

Children need regular meals and snacks to get the energy (calories) and goodness or 'nutrients' they need for growing and fighting off illness. Children's nutritional needs change as they get older, so it is important to be aware of these changes. This Food Fact Sheet will help you ensure your child is eating the right food, however old they are.

Family eating

Eating family meals together helps encourage children to enjoy a variety of foods and to spend time with the family. It is a good idea to eat together as a family at the table and not alongside other activities, for example watching the TV, to prevent distractions.

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Children who have breakfast have been shown to concentrate better throughout the morning. Offer a savoury and a sweet course at both lunchtime and at the evening meal, so children have a variety of different foods and nutrients.

Try to put a jug of water on the table to keep everyone hydrated. Plus there is some evidence that children who drink extra water perform better in attention and memory tests!

Healthy foods

The nutrients children need are found in the four main food groups. They should all be offered every day:

1. Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods

Each meal should be based on food from this group. This includes bread, potatoes, pasta, rice and grains such as couscous or breakfast cereal at main meals and scones, buns, muffins, crumpets or cereal bars for snacks. For children who are over five-years-old, wholegrain varieties are a better option, these are healthier and more filling.

2. Fruit and vegetables

Aim for five portions of fruit and vegetables every day. These can be fresh, frozen, tinned (in own juice), dried or juice. Fruit juice can be given as a drink at mealtimes [see drinks section]. Try to include both fruit and vegetables at main meals and fruit can be used as a snack or to make smoothies.

3. Milk and dairy foods

This group provides children with protein and calcium which is important for healthy bone development. Good sources include dairy products such as milk, cheese, yoghurt and fromage frais. Non-dairy alternatives to cows milk can be given from one-year of age. Ensure they are fortified with calcium and unsweetened. If you need more advice, do talk to a health professional.

Your child should ideally aim for three servings of calcium-rich food a day – for example, a 150ml glass of milk, a small pot of yoghurt and a small matchboxsized piece of cheese. Children under five years are growing rapidly and therefore have a higher requirement for energy. For this reason, children under two years should have full fat milk and dairy foods. Semi-skimmed milk can be introduced from two years if they are growing well. Children over the age of five should follow a healthy diet suitable for all the family.

4. Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein

Meat, fish, eggs, nuts, pulses (like beans, lentils and peas) and foods made from pulses (like tofu, hummus and soya mince) are excellent sources of protein and iron. A variety of these foods are needed two to three times a day.

Foods and drinks high in fat and/or sugar

Foods which are high in sugar and fat will provide extra energy but few nutrients. This group includes biscuits, cake, ice-cream, sweets, chocolate, savoury snacks such as crisps, chips and sugary drinks.

High sugar intakes often lead to tooth decay. It is important to avoid giving your child frequent sugary drinks, snacks or sweets to protect their teeth and overall health. If you want to give them something sugary, it is best at mealtimes.

Only offer foods in this group occasionally. Why not grill, steam or bake foods instead of frying them and use a smaller amount of butter, margarine or oil in cooking or on bread.

Drinks

The best drinks for children are water and milk as they will not damage teeth. Fizzy drinks and squashes can provide excess energy and lead to unnecessary weight gain, and/or replace something more nutritious.

Pure fruit juice and smoothies provide quite a lot of sugar. Dilute any sweet drinks with water – one part squash to ten parts water or half pure juice/half water for children under five – where possible and offer at mealtimes only.

Offer children a drink with each meal and one or two drinks in-between. It is a good idea to offer extra drinks when it is hot and during sport. Tea reduces iron absorption so it's not an ideal drink, why not offer warm milk instead.

Salty foods

Children do not need salt added to their food – try using herbs and spices instead. It is a good idea to limit salty snacks like crisps and reduce the amount of processed salty foods such as ready meals.

Does my child need supplements?

All children aged six months to four years should be given a supplement containing vitamins A and C and D, such as Healthy Start vitamin drops. All children over the age of one should obtain 10 micrograms of vitamin D especially during autumn and winter, so additional vitamin D daily supplements may be required. For more information on vitamin D, see the BDA Food Fact Sheet on this topic.

Summary

Food and eating can be great fun! Children love to get involved, so take them to the shops to help choose different foods, let them help with cooking and talk about healthy eating.

This can help encourage children to try new foods and make it a pleasurable experience for the whole family.