
Getting the Food and Activity Balance Right

A guide for parents and caregivers with children aged 2-5 years identified with or at risk of obesity



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Many parents/caregivers find it difficult to know how much to feed their child. It is important to remember that if a child is given more food than they need, they will gain weight at an unhealthy rate. Read on for some tips to help you get the balance right.

Portions

Children have smaller stomachs than adults so they need child-sized portions. Use child-sized plates or side plates to control portion sizes. At each main meal offer at least one serving of vegetables or salad (enough to cover at least one-third of the plate) e.g. a sandwich served with cucumber sticks and cherry tomato pieces or fish pie served with carrots and green beans.

Another visual way to help you offer the right amount is to use your child's hand size as a guide and follow these three simple rules at main meal times:

- Use your child's palm size for the protein portion (meat, fish, shellfish, poultry, pulses beans, egg)
- Their fist size for the starchy carbohydrate portion (pasta, rice, potato, slice of bread etc);
- Both their hands cupped together for the vegetable portion (excluding potato).

It's easy to eat more food than needed when larger portions are offered. Show your child to tell you when they feel full and let them stop eating at this point; don't ever force them to finish what is on their plate.



Drink Choice

Thirst and hunger can easily be confused especially by young children so it is really important to make sure you offer enough drinks. Did you know that we should all have at least 6 to 8 drinks every day? The drink size varies with age, adults needing larger drinks than toddlers. Have a think to see how you can fit in at least 6 drinks each day for your child.

Water is the best choice of drink between meals and with lunch and dinner. Fizzy drinks, squashes and juice drinks all contain lots of added sugar (and calories) and are best avoided. Fruit juices and smoothies can have a similar calorie (and sugar) content to fizzy drinks - so it is better for your child to enjoy eating a piece of fruit and drinking water instead!

Tips to make water more interesting:

- Have a jug of water on your table at mealtimes and encourage your child to drink between meal times by giving them a funky water bottle
- Add slice of orange or pieces of fruit when making ice cubes, to make water more interesting.



Fruit and Vegetables

Does your child get their '5-a-day'? Fruit and vegetables are really good for us and they can also help us feel fuller for longer as they are packed with fibre and water. A useful portion guide for fruit is the amount that fits into your child's hand.

Sometimes children eat everything when they are introduced to solid foods in the first year of life but appear to go off fruit or vegetables in the toddler years; if this has happened to your child have a look at the top tips below.



Improve fruit and vegetable intake

Top tips

- It can take numerous, repeated exposures to new foods if they are not accepted straight away. Keep offering a variety of different fruits and vegetables every day.
- It can be useful to look at lots of different fruit and vegetables when you are shopping with your child. Your child can then decide what they'd like to try.
- If your child doesn't like getting messy with food - try wrapping the fruit or vegetable in clingfilm or foil so they don't need to touch it. Eco-friendly alternatives are a clean coating with beeswax food wrap. Some fruit and vegetables can be eaten easily with a knife and fork too e.g. a slice of mango.
- Try not to react when a child negatively responds to eating fruit or vegetables, especially if the child is fussy. Praise good behaviour if they do attempt to eat fruit or vegetables.
- Don't offer a 'treat' food if they try/finish all their fruit or vegetable as this reinforces the idea that the 'treat' tastes better!
- Get your child involved in making or growing their food/snack. Children often eat their own handiwork! Why not try making fruit salad, fruit faces from different fruit pieces or even a slice of fruit pizza (use watermelon for the base and top with pieces of different fruits e.g. sliced banana and chopped grapes).



Sensible Snacking

Young children do need to eat regularly but snack time shouldn't be treat time, just a continuation of your usual healthy diet. Typically, the healthiest snack choices need a bit of preparation which can be a great opportunity to get your child involved too. Could they chop up a piece of fruit or vegetable with a child-safe knife? Try offering fruit or vegetables only as their mid-morning snack; this is a great way to prepare them for this snack at infant school.



Help develop healthy snacking habits:

Top
tips

- Encourage your child to eat snacks sitting down at a table and without any distractions. (If a snack is eaten quickly on the way home from nursery or in front of the television, it is easy for your child not to appreciate how much they have eaten and so they may very quickly be looking for more food).
- Always offer a drink with a snack, water is the best choice.
- Your child's snack choice is something that you can control as they eat the food you have at home or that you buy when you are out. Try to keep a healthy snack in their change bag, so you always have something suitable to offer your child when you are out.
- Avoiding the 'treat' snack aisles in the supermarket or internet shopping are good ways to help you control your shopping choices so that healthy snack choices end up in your basket!
- If friends and relatives like to bring 'treats' when they visit – give them some ideas that you would be happy for your child to receive e.g. stickers, magazines or their favourite fruit.
- It sounds obvious but we typically want to eat the food we can see - so have a good look at what food you can see in your kitchen. (Remember to look at what they can see at their eye level too). Try hiding your biscuit tin away and just having out a bowl of fruit.