How children develop: Food and nutrition (1 to 5 years)

Every child is an individual and develops at his or her own pace. Children grow and learn continually, but not always in a smooth-flowing pattern. The early years of life are important for developing healthy habits to continue throughout life. This fact sheet is a general guide to food and nutrition and child development. If you have any concerns about your child’s development, seek advice from your child health nurse or doctor.

Eating habits

Children can be eating and enjoying healthy meals and meal times with the rest of the family from 12 months of age.

- If you need to, just modify the texture of the food you are eating to make it suitable for your child’s age (e.g. cut meats in small pieces, or serve small pasta pieces that are easy for your child to pick up).
- It can be concerning or frustrating when your child is often refusing food. Remember that children do not grow as quickly in their second year as they do in their first. This means their appetite will not be as big.
- Young children are also more capable of expressing likes and dislikes. You are responsible for what your child is offered to eat, when the food is offered and for making meal times pleasant. Your child is responsible for how much, or even whether, they eat.
- Remember young children’s little stomachs need small amounts of food more often (5 to 6 times a day).

Planning meals from 12 months

How much children eat varies from child to child and from day to day depending on growth and activity levels. Aim to include a variety of foods from all of the following 5 food groups. The serving sizes and amounts below can be used as a daily guide to feeding your young child.

Vegetables and legumes

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<th>Serves per day</th>
<th>2–3 servings</th>
<th>4.5 servings</th>
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<td>1–2 years</td>
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<td>4–8 years</td>
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One serve of vegetables is about 75g or:

- 1/2 cup of cooked green or orange vegetables, peas, beans or lentils
- 1 cup of green leafy or raw salad vegetables
- 1/2 a medium potato or other starchy vegetable (i.e. sweet potato).

Tips:
- Try to offer a variety of both raw and cooked vegetables.
- Try either fresh or frozen options. You can also use canned vegetables, but be sure to drain and rinse them well.
- Avoid hard vegetables (e.g. raw carrot) for children younger than 3 years of age. These foods can cause choking.

Fruit

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One serve of fruit is about 150g or:

- 1 medium piece of fruit (e.g. apple, banana, orange, pear)
- 2 small pieces of fruit (e.g. apricots, kiwi fruits, plums)
- 1 cup diced or canned fruit (in juice).

Or only occasionally:

- 125mL (1/2 cup) fruit juice (no added sugar)
- 30g dried fruit.
Tips:
- Try both fresh and frozen fruit.
- Cook or grate hard fruits for children younger than 3 years of age (e.g. apple) to prevent choking.
- Choose canned fruits in juice instead of in syrup. Fruit in syrup has extra sugars added.

Grain (cereal foods)

1–2 years 2–3 years 4–8 years

Serves per day 4 4 4

One serve of grain (cereals) is:
- 1 slice of bread
- 1/2 a medium bread roll or flat bread
- 1/2 cup of cooked rice, pasta, noodles, barley, quinoa
- 1/2 cup of cooked porridge or 2/3 cup cereal flakes
- 3 crispbreads
- 1 crumpet or small English muffin.

Tips:
- This group also includes couscous, polenta, flat breads, pikelets, crumpets, raisin bread, and dry biscuits.
- Choose mostly wholegrain or high-fibre versions.

Lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans

1–2 years 2–3 years 4–8 years

Serves per day 1 1 1.5

One serve is equal to:
- 65g cooked lean meats (e.g. beef, lamb, veal, pork)
- 80g cooked lean poultry (e.g. chicken or turkey)
- 100g cooked fish fillet or 1 small can fish (e.g. tuna or salmon)
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup cooked or canned legumes/beans
- 170g tofu
- 30g nuts or seeds (only for children over 3 years), nut butter or tahini.

Tips:
- Red meat is a good source of iron. Try to include it often.
- Use only smooth nut pastes for children younger than 3 years of age.

Milk, yoghurt, cheese, or alternatives

1–2 years 2–3 years 4–8 years

Serves per day (girls) 1–1.5 1.5 1.5

Serves per day (boys) 1–1.5 1.5 2

One serve is equal to:
• 1 cup (250mL) cow’s milk
• 2 slices of hard cheese (e.g. cheddar)
• 1/2 cup ricotta cheese
• 200g tub of yoghurt
• 1 cup (250mL) soy, rice or other cereal-drink milk with at least 100mg added calcium per 100mL. You can find this on the nutrition label.

Tips:
• Full-cream milk can be used instead of formula from 12 months of age. Continue to breastfeed for as long as you and your baby would like.
• Reduced-fat milks can be offered from 2 years of age.
• Limit milk to no more than 500mL per day. Too much milk can fill your child up and stop them from being hungry enough to eat foods.

Choosing and preparing food

• Choose foods that are low in salt. Aim for fresh or frozen vegetables, or drain and wash canned vegetables and legumes well. Limit store-bought sauces, soups, and canned foods like baked beans, or choose ‘salt reduced’ or ‘no added salt’ versions.
• Limit snack foods and drinks containing added sugar. These include items such as sweets, cakes, some flavoured yoghurts or muesli bars, soft drink, cordial, and juice. Look for sugar in the ingredient list.
• Prepare foods so they are tasty without adding salt or sugar. Try using herbs or mix different flavours and textures.
• Choose water as a drink. Fruit juice, cordials and soft drinks are not necessary.
• Children have a higher risk of illness from unsafe food. Care for your child’s food: prepare and store it correctly.

Meal and snack ideas

Here are some healthy meal and snack ideas for your young child:

• Plan regular meal and snack times—toddlers need structure, routines and limits.
• Meals and snacks can look more appealing when they have a variety of colours and shapes (e.g. use melon balls on fruit, or use biscuit cutters for different sandwich shapes).
• Offer vegetables at 2 or 3 meal times over the day (e.g. as a snack with dips, on a sandwich at lunch, grated into pasta or stir fry at dinner).
• Try including yoghurt or cheese (e.g. ricotta) in dips, in pasta sauce, or to replace cream or sour cream in cooking and baking.
• Let your child choose between options (e.g. between 2 types of fruit, between 2 sandwich fillings).
• Replace sugar sweetened drinks with water. Try adding fresh fruit slices or ice cubes in special shapes.
• Keep ‘treat’ foods for special occasions.
• Swap sweetened desserts for cut up fruit with yoghurt.

For more information

Talk to your local child health nurse or doctor if you would like more information on your child’s development or if you are concerned about your child’s growth. Seek help from a dietitian if you are concerned about your child’s diet or weight. You could also ask at your local library for books on child development.

Resources for parents, families and carers


Related content


Acknowledgement

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This information is drawn from:

- National Health and Medical Research Council 2013, Australian dietary guidelines.
- National Health and Medical Research Council 2013, Infant feeding guidelines.
- Children’s Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service 2015, Child health information: Your guide to the first 12 months.

This fact sheet is also the result of input and effort from many health professionals in Queensland. Their assistance with the content is greatly appreciated.

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