



How children develop – 2-3 years

Food and nutrition

Every child is an individual.

Every child develops at their own pace, usually through the same stages and milestones, and in the same order.

Children grow and learn continually, but not in a smooth flowing pattern. Sometimes they practise skills for quite a while and seem as if they will never move on. At other times they learn many skills very quickly.

This fact sheet is a general guide to child development. If you have any concerns about your child's development, seek advice from your child health nurse or doctor.

Eating habits

Your child should be eating and enjoying healthy meals and meal times with the rest of the family. As often as possible, offer 'family meals'. Children do not need special foods. If you need to, just modify the texture of the food you are eating, e.g. cut up meats and serve small pasta pieces that are easy for your child to pick up.

Parents often become concerned that their child is not eating enough and frustrated that everything they prepare is refused. Remember that your child will not grow as quickly now as they did when they were a baby. This means that their appetite will not be as big.

A toddler is also more capable of expressing likes and dislikes. You are responsible for what your child is offered to eat, when the food is offered (toddlers' little stomachs need small meals 5-6 times a day) and for making meal times pleasant. Your child is responsible for how much, or even whether, they eat.

Planning meals

How much food is eaten at this age varies from child to child and from day to day and is influenced by growth and activity levels. These serving sizes and amounts can be used as a guide to feeding your 2-3 year old each day. Some serve sizes are different to those commonly used for adults.

Breads, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles

3 to 5 servings daily

(one serve = 1 slice of bread, or 1/2 cup cereal, or 1/2 cup cooked rice, pasta, noodles).

This includes all kinds of wholemeal, whole grain and white bread, cereal, rice, pasta, noodles, such as pikelets, crackers, raisin bread, dry biscuits and fruit buns.

Vegetables, legumes

3 to 5 servings daily

(one serve = 1/4 cup).

Encourage your baby to taste and try a wide variety of both raw and cooked vegetables. This is important in helping your baby develop healthy eating habits.

Fresh vegetables are best, but frozen and canned are good alternatives. Avoid hard vegetables such as raw carrot sticks, which could cause choking.

Fruit

1-2 servings daily

(one serve = one piece – e.g. Small apple, banana, pear, stone fruit, etc.

Fresh fruit is best, but frozen, canned and dried are good alternatives.

Milk, yoghurt and cheese

3 servings daily

(one serve = 1 cup or 250ml of milk, custard or 200g tub yoghurt or 30g cheese or cheese slice).

Children do not need special yoghurts or custards. Full cream milk can now be used instead of formula.

Meat, fish, poultry, eggs, nuts, legumes

2 servings daily

(one serve = 1/2 cup meat or 30-50g or 1/2 cup kidney beans or other legume, or 40-50g fish, or 1 egg, or 1 tablespoon peanut paste).

Red meat is an excellent source of iron. Try to include it often.

Nuts are not recommended for young children as they could cause choking. Use only smooth nut pastes.

Some points to remember

Choose foods low in salt

Eat only moderate amounts of sugar and foods containing added sugar.

Care for your child's food: Prepare and store it correctly.

Your child should also have plenty of opportunity to be active.

What to drink

Choose water as a drink. Fruit juice, cordials and soft drinks are not necessary.





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How to help your child eat a nutritious, healthy diet

- Plan regular meal and snack times – toddlers need structure, routines and limits.
- Make meals and snacks look appealing e.g. use a range of colours and shapes. Food should also be easy to chew and handle.
- Encourage your child to eat with you and your family. Children learn by imitating the people around them.
- Do not force your child to eat. Respect that they may have certain likes and dislikes and give them some choice in selecting food, e.g. let them choose between two types of fruit or sandwich fillings.
- Be consistent with how you handle food refusal.
- Avoid substituting uneaten meals for other foods. ‘Treating’ your child with unhealthy food because you are worried they are not eating only makes them less likely to eat healthier foods. Only buy and offer healthy foods.
- Do not use food as a bribe for behaviour.
- Set aside 20-30 minutes for meal times and 10-12 minutes for snacks.

Your child’s healthy height and weight should be a guide to their diet. If you are concerned about your child’s diet, talk to your child health nurse or your doctor.

For more information

If you would like more information on your child’s development or if you are concerned about your child, contact your local child health nurse.

You could also ask at your local library for books on child development.

Acknowledgement

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