

Healthy Eating for Toddlers

Toddlerhood is a time when children learn about new foods and lifelong eating habits are established. To help children grow up to be healthy adults, it is important to teach them healthy eating habits as early as possible.

Growth and appetite

Your child's growth will be rapid during the first year of life. This growth will slow down in the second year. This means their food intake is likely to slow down too. Toddlers are also starting to show their independence and food is one of the only things they have control over. So it is not surprising that they like to say "no" to foods and make their own choices. As toddlers are getting better at moving around, they will spend more time exploring their world. This leaves less time for eating and drinking. Remember these are normal behaviours.

As a parent, your responsibility is to make sure you provide appropriate foods at the right times and the rest is up to your child. Toddlers have good signals for hunger and fullness and they should decide "how much" and "whether" they eat at all. Trust your child's appetite and try not to fuss about the amount of food your child eats. The more you fuss about the amount of food eaten, the more your child will react and it will turn meal times into an unpleasant experience for everyone.

If you are worried your child is not eating enough food, eating too much food or you are concerned about their growth, contact your Maternal Child Health Nurse, General Practitioner or Dietitian

Healthy eating habits to encourage

You can encourage your toddler to eat well by being a good role model and eating healthy, regular meals yourself. Your child will learn good eating habits by watching you.

- Toddlers need to eat regularly as they have small tummies. Develop a regular meal time routine consisting of 3 meals and a snack between each meal. Offer small serves and your child will ask for more if they are still hungry. Remember your child is in charge of how much they eat. Do not force them to eat if they are not hungry.
- Set aside 20-30 minutes for main meals and 10-20 minutes for snacks. Avoid any distractions like television, toys or games during meal times.
- Try to limit 'grazing' between meal and snack times. If your child constantly eats they may not be hungry for their meal or snack and this will make them less likely to try new foods.
- Refusing to try new foods is common. Food may need to be offered 10 times or more before it becomes familiar and happily accepted. Re-offer the new food every two to three days.
- Offer a variety of foods. Food refusal may be caused by boredom. Try offering different nutritious foods or change the texture, appearance or taste of a certain food. For example, try cutting sandwiches in different shapes or roasting vegetables rather than steaming.
- You decide what food is on offer. Allow your child to have some choices but keep them simple. Offer 2 food options with similar nutrient value, for example "Would you like to have yoghurt or custard for afternoon tea?"
- Do not use food as a reward or punishment. If food is offered as a reward, then this food will be preferred above others. Non-food rewards can be useful, for example sticker charts, books, toys or a visit to a playground.
- Avoid giving popcorn, hard lollies, hard fruits, hard vegetables in chunks, or whole nuts to children less than 3 years of age due to the choking risk.
- Avoid foods high in sugar such as sweet biscuits, soft drinks, sweets, cordial and juices.

Iron

Iron deficiency anaemia is the most common nutritional deficiency in childhood. Toddlers who drink large volumes of milk or juices are at greater risk of low iron stores. This is because these fluids contain very little iron and toddlers can fill up on them which reduces their appetite for iron-rich foods.

A toddler requires no more than 400ml milk each day. Fruit juice should be avoided as a daily drink and limited to no more than half a cup if given on special occasions.

Good food sources of iron include: red meat, poultry, fish, legumes, nuts/seeds, and cereals fortified with iron. Your dietitian can provide you with specific information to meet your toddler's needs.

Fluids

Water should be encouraged as your child's main drink. Water is freely available, and contains no sugar, calories, or artificial colours and flavours. Most children enjoy water if it is offered from an early age. Try offering water with a fun straw or cup, or add ice cube shapes. Avoid cordial, soft drink and fruit juice.

Suitable Snacks

Toddlers and young children need small, frequent snacks. They generally cannot eat enough food at main meals to provide sufficient energy and nutrients for the day. Choosing the right snacks for your child is important. Pre-packaged snacks are widely available at supermarkets but they are often high in sugar and unhealthy fats. They are convenient but this does not mean children should consume them every day. Try to limit snacking just prior to a main meal as it may reduce your child's appetite. Eat snacks at the designated eating place in your home, such as the dining table. Turn off the TV and minimise distractions.

Example of suitable snacks:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fresh fruit slices or canned fruits (in natural juice)• Small tub of yoghurt or custard• Fruit bun, raisin toast or pikelets with a thin spread of margarine or avocado• Sandwiches (peanut butter / ham & cheese / vegemite)• Cheese slices• Baked bean or spaghetti on toast• Hard boiled eggs• Cup of plain milk	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Soft vegetable sticks (e.g. steamed sweet potatoes or carrot sticks, cucumber, cherry tomatoes). Serve with a dip such as hummus• Rice crackers or corn cakes with toppings such as hummus, cream cheese, ricotta cheese, tuna or avocado• Fruit smoothie (milk blended with fresh fruits)• Homemade muffins with fruit or grated vegetables included
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How much should my toddler eat?

Your toddler's diet should be based on foods from the five food groups. This table can be used as a guide to the number of serves to offer each day from each food group. Be guided by your toddler's appetite; the amount they eat will vary each day. You may need to offer smaller portions throughout the day if your toddler has a small appetite.

Breads and cereals	Serve size	Tips
4 serves daily	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1 slice of bread• ½ bread roll• 2/3 cup cereal• ½ cup cooked porridge• ¼ cup muesli• ½ cup cooked rice, pasta or noodles• 3 crisp breads• 1 small English muffin or scone• 4-5 dry crackers	<p>Choose wholegrain products or high fibre varieties</p> <p>Choose cereal products low in sugar (compare sugar/100g on labels)</p>
Vegetables	Serve size	Tips
2 to 3 serves daily	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ½ cup cooked vegetables• 1 small potato or ½ cup mashed potato• 1 cup salad vegetables• 1 medium tomato• ½ cup cooked or canned beans or lentils	<p>Offer a variety of different coloured vegetables each day.</p>
Fruits	Serve size	Tips
1 serve daily	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1 medium banana, apple, orange or pear• 2 small fruits, e.g. apricots, kiwi fruit or plums• 1 cup diced or canned fruit• 30g dried fruit (eg 4 dried apricot halves or 1 ½ tbsp sultanas)• ½ cup fruit juice – should be limited to 1 serve daily	<p>Fresh fruit is a better choice than fruit juice as it also provides fibre for healthy bowels.</p> <p>Choose canned fruit in natural fruit juice instead of syrup.</p>

Dairy	Serve size	Tips
1 ½ serves daily	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 cup (250ml) of milk • 200g of yoghurt • 2 slices (40g) of cheese • 1 cup of calcium fortified soy, rice or other cereal milk (must be fortified with at least 100mg calcium / 100ml). Check with your dietitian to ensure you have selected an appropriate alternative. 	<p>Children less than 2 years of age need full fat dairy products.</p> <p>Reduced fat milk can be offered to children from 2 years.</p>
Lean meat, poultry, fish, eggs and meat alternatives	Serve size	Tips
1 serve daily	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 65g cooked meats (beef, lamb, veal, pork, goat or kangaroo) • 80g of cooked chicken or turkey • 100g of cooked fish • 1 small can of fish • 2 large eggs • 1 cup cooked or canned beans or legumes • 30g of nuts, seeds, peanut butter or other nut spreads 	<p>Choose lean meat and trim off visible fat.</p> <p>Do not offer whole nuts to children younger than 3 years due to the risk of choking.</p>