

Healthy fats for children

Dietary fats are essential for your child's health and development. They help the body absorb vitamins A, D, E and K. Dietary fats also help to make hormones. However, the type and amount of fat children eat is important.

As dietary fat is very high in energy, too much can cause children to become an unhealthy weight. Children whose diets contain too many saturated or trans fats are more likely to have higher cholesterol levels and heart disease later in life. It is important to set good eating habits at a young age.

Low-fat and reduced-fat milks (skim milk and milk with 2-2.5% fat) are not recommended in the first two years of life.

There are 3 types of fat in our diets:

1. Saturated and trans fats

Saturated and trans fats are considered less healthy types of fat as they raise blood cholesterol and can increase the risk of heart disease. You should limit the amount of saturated and trans fat in your child's diet. Saturated and trans fats are found in fatty meats, full fat dairy products (milk, cheese, cream), butter, coconut and palm oil, deep fried takeaway foods and commercially baked products such as biscuits and pastries. Trans fats are not always listed in the nutritional panel on food items. A "hidden" source is hydrogenated vegetable oil.

2. Polyunsaturated fats

Polyunsaturated fats are better for the body as they can help reduce blood cholesterol, especially when your child's intake of saturated fat is low. Foods that contain polyunsaturated fats include sunflower, safflower and soybean oils, fish, legumes, nuts and seeds. There are 2 types of polyunsaturated fats: Omega-3 and Omega-6. Both are healthier alternatives compared to saturated or trans fats for your child.

3. Monounsaturated fats

Monounsaturated fats can lower blood cholesterol if meals and snacks are also low in saturated fat. Monounsaturated fats are found in canola oil, olive oil, avocado, nuts and seeds.

Limit these foods

These are examples of foods that are high in saturated fat:

- Devon / salami
- Crumbed and battered fish / meat
- Sausage rolls / pies
- Potato chips / crisps / hot chips
- Hamburger, pizza (takeaway)
- Butter / mayonnaise
- Milk chocolate
- cream-based sauces
- Chicken with skin on / sausage
- Fried takeaway or fried homemade foods
- Pastries / biscuits / cakes / doughnuts / cheesecakes

Tips for providing less saturated and trans fats in your child's meals:

- Provide meals with plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain breads and cereals.
- Choose lean cuts of meat and mince. Trim any visible fat off meat and remove skin from chicken.
- Buy reduced fat dairy products. Try reduced fat fruit yoghurt and cheese. Reduced fat dairy products can be used from 2 years of age.
- Choose monounsaturated or polyunsaturated oils. Examples include sunflower, safflower, olive, canola, and soybean oils.
- Use other types of spreads on bread instead of butter. Try avocado, hummus or chutney.
- Have fish at least twice a week.
- Limit takeaway foods to once a week.

Healthy snack ideas for children

- Reduced fat / diet yoghurt. Freeze overnight and take to school
- Low fat milk – blend with fruit to make a smoothie
- Reduced fat frozen yoghurt
- Celery / carrot sticks with ricotta, salsa or peanut butter
- Wholegrain crackers (eg. Vita-weets, Premiums, rice cakes) with vegemite or avocado
- Muffins with jam or shaved ham and relish
- Fruit – fresh, frozen or canned
- Home prepared plain popcorn
- Crumpets with honey
- Dried fruit and nuts
- Bagel / fruit toast with ricotta
- Baked beans toasted sandwich
- Toasted Lebanese bread chips dipped in tomato salsa / hummus / avocado