

Children's Section: Healthy Eating for the under 5's

This dietary advice sheet gives some general information to help you make the recommended changes to your child's diet. If you need more detailed advice or if your child is following a special diet that makes it difficult to make these changes, please ask your doctor to refer your child to a registered dietitian.

Children require regular meals and snacks to give them the energy and nutrients they need to grow and fight off illness. Eating family meals together will encourage them to enjoy a variety of foods. Snacking all day in place of meals, usually results in eating an unbalanced diet. To encourage good eating habits, try to sit down and eat meals as a family without the distractions of the television or computer games.

Breakfast is essential every day as it gives children an energy boost to cope with busy mornings at nursery or school. Offer both a savoury and a sweet course at the midday and evening meals to give two chances to eat different foods and nutrients.

What does a balanced diet mean?

- 1. Fruit and vegetables** - it is important for a variety of fruit and vegetables to be introduced into a child's diet from weaning. This will encourage them to continue to like them during childhood. Fruit and vegetables provide lots of vitamins and minerals which are important for fighting off illnesses. They also contain fibre which helps to maintain regular bowel movements and prevent constipation. Fruit and vegetables can be included as part of a meal, chopped up and given as a snack or as fruit juice or smoothies. Children should aim for at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables every day. A portion is equal to a handful!
- 2. Cereals, potatoes, rice and pasta** – these are all carbohydrate foods which give children slow-release energy. Try and choose the low sugar varieties of breakfast cereals such as Weetabix, Shredded Wheat, Ready Brek or Shreddies and add dried fruit rather than sugar. Choose unrefined higher fibre types of bread and pasta such as wholemeal and granary bread, whole wheat pasta and brown rice. Children should aim to have a carbohydrate source at each mealtime plus sometimes as snacks between meals too.
- 3. Meat, fish and alternatives** – these are all protein foods which are important for helping children to grow and to repair muscles. Try and include a variety of different protein containing foods such as lean meats, fish, baked beans, eggs, pulses, peas and lentils. Children should aim to have protein at least twice a day.
- 4. Milk and dairy foods** – these are all calcium containing foods and are important in a child's diet to support bone and teeth development. Children under 2 should ideally be offered full cream milk. Between the ages of 2-5 children should be offered semi skimmed milk and after 5 years of age it is parental choice whether children are offered semi skimmed or skimmed milk. Children should aim to have dairy foods three times a day. Soya products which are calcium enriched are suitable alternatives for those over 6 months of age with lactose intolerance.

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- 5. Foods containing fat and sugar** – fat is an important part of a child's diet to enable growth and development, and the requirement for children under 5 is higher than for those who are older. Children should ideally be offered healthy fats such as those from vegetable sources e.g., sunflower oil, rapeseed oils and spreads, and not excessive quantities of fats from pastries, crisps and manufactured products. Sugar does not give us any vitamins or minerals, only calories which can lead to excess weight gain if eaten regularly. Sugar can also cause tooth decay. Try and include low sugar puddings, snacks and drinks e.g., sugar free jelly and sugar free squash.
- 6. Drinks** – the ideal drinks which should be offered to children are water and milk. A 200ml serving of pure fruit juice would count as one portion of fruit per day, fruit flavoured squashes should be kept to a minimum and ideally sugar free. Excessive squash intake can sometimes be associated with loose bowels movements and poor eating habits.

Example of a day's menu

Breakfast – breakfast cereal e.g., Weetabix, Shreddies or Ready Brek with milk, glass of fruit juice or boiled egg with soldiers

Mid-morning snack – portion of fruit/chopped fruit salad pieces

Lunch – wholemeal bread sandwich with ham and salad, yogurt, fruit

Mid afternoon snack – piece of toast with spread

Evening meal – family meal e.g., spaghetti bolognaise or roast dinner, fruit pudding e.g. apple crumble with custard

Bedtime snack – plain biscuit and glass of milk

If you are concerned that your child is overweight, the main aim would be to maintain their current weight whilst continuing to increase their height. Your child will therefore grow into their weight. It is not recommended to put children under 5 on low calorie or weight loss diets. Simply follow the healthy eating principles above and increase activity levels.

Don't forget exercise...

Keeping active is the best way to stay a healthy weight. Try and have family activities on a regular basis as active parents tend to have active children. Include activities on a daily basis such as walking to nursery/school, playing in the park on the way home, walking the dog daily. Teach your children how to ride a bike or kick a football around in the garden. Try and limit the amount of time spent each day watching television and playing on computer/ screen games.

If you are concerned about your child's weight why not enrol them on to a HENRY (Health, Exercise and Nutrition for the Really Young).

HENRY aims to help your child stay a healthy weight.