

toddler food healthy toddler eating





Toddler Food

These days, healthy food for children can be a confusing business. With lunchbox-sized bananas, cartoon-covered cereals and miniature tubs of yoghurt, there have never been so many foods aimed specifically at children.

Toddler Food is a simple guide to providing children under four years of age with a healthy daily diet. It's written by Glenn Cardwell, Accredited Practising Dietitian, and you'll find it a great source of quick tips and recipes to make nutrition for children really simple.

Toddler Food is part of a suite of HBF Healthy Eating Guides that have been produced in response to requests from Western Australian childcare workers and parents.

The Healthy Eating Guides form part of HBF's Community Health Advocacy Program, which aims to encourage Western Australians to adopt healthy lifestyle practises by partnering with health-related events and providing a comprehensive range of health information to the community.

We want your toddler to develop good eating habits and hope this is a useful guide that brings health and vitality to your family.

Stay healthy!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Duncan Jefferson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'D'.

HBF Family Doctor
Duncan Jefferson

Good food, bad food

You've heard it many times before: the eating habits learned early in childhood can last a lifetime. Indeed, the types and amounts of food consumed may influence the risk of disease later in adulthood. That makes eating in early childhood so important. Don't expect to have a child that eats 'perfectly'; it is our role to encourage children to try and enjoy a range of nutritious foods.

As young children eat less than adults and prefer smaller serves, a number of foods now come in small pre-packaged serves. Some supermarkets promote packs of smaller fruits to children, such as small apples and bananas.

Often you will see pre-packaged processed foods in small serves marketed to parents of young children. You will still need to judge these as 'everyday' food (eg. yoghurt) or 'sometimes' food (eg. salted snack foods). Although convenient, a small pre-packaged snack does not always mean it is ideal for children every day.

The Australian Government has set up nutrition guidelines for children.

They make it clear that there is no good food or bad food. The key point is that children get the right balance of foods. It is more helpful to refer to food as 'everyday' food, like fruit, vegetables and milk, and 'sometimes' foods, such as cakes, biscuits and confectionery.





Dietary guidelines for children

It has been long recognised that good nutrition is very important in the growth and development of children, both physically and mentally. The Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents are designed to promote optimal growth and development. It must be stressed that the guidelines are not in order of importance.

- 1. Encourage and support breastfeeding.**
- 2. Children and adolescents need sufficient nutritious foods to grow and develop normally.**
- 3. Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods.**
- 4. Eat plenty of vegetables, legumes and fruit.**
- 5. Eat plenty of cereals (including breads, rice, pasta and noodles), preferably wholegrain.**
- 6. Include lean meat, fish, poultry and/or alternatives.**
- 7. Include milks, yoghurts, cheeses and/or alternatives.**
- 8. Choose water as a drink.**
- 9. Limit saturated fat and moderate total fat intake.**
- 10. Choose foods low in salt.**
- 11. Consume only moderate amounts of sugars and foods containing added sugars.**
- 12. Care for your child's food; prepare and store it safely.**

Infants

The value of breast milk

Breast milk is a complete liquid food for the first six months of life. It is easy to digest and has unique properties that help with growth, development and immunity of the child. Infants do not require other fluids or solids during this time. In the second six months, supplementary solid foods can be offered along with breast milk. If breastfeeding has to be stopped before the infant is 12 months old, then a commercial breast milk substitute should be given.

Breastfeeding has many health benefits for both infant and mother, such as less diarrhoeal illnesses and respiratory infection for the infant, and quicker weight loss back to pre-pregnancy weight for many mothers.

When an informed mother chooses not to breastfeed, or is unable to breastfeed, the only acceptable alternative is a commercial infant formula. Infant formula manufacturers continually modify their products to be as close as possible to breast milk and they are nutritionally adequate for the first year of life.

When can I introduce cow's milk?

Cow's milk is not suitable for infants under one year old, but after the first birthday full cream milk can be given to your child. Skim milk or reduced-fat milk should not be given to children less than two years as they require the extra energy for this rapid growth period.

Between the ages of 2–5 years it is quite okay to give reduced-fat milks and yoghurts as the fat content of the child's diet can be replaced by carbohydrate foods. Skim milk, however, should not be given until the child is five years of age.

Introducing solid foods

At around six months of age, infants have good neck and head control, as well as having the tongue and mouth movements necessary for the proper swallowing of foods. Pureed foods can be introduced at six months, such as potato, carrots and soft fruits. There is no advantage in introducing solids earlier than six months. It certainly doesn't help them sleep through the night, unfortunately!

At six months, infants have higher iron needs and so require a good source of iron, such as iron-fortified infant cereals.

Rice cereal is usually the first choice as it is least likely to cause an allergic reaction.

Gradually, the texture is increased to mashed food as the child is better able to chew. Finger foods such as cheese, bread and soft fruit are offered at 9–12 months.

Only one new food is introduced at a time to assess any potential allergic response (unlikely, but possible). New foods are often rejected the first few times they are offered, so persevere as you may have to offer a new food up to eight different times before it is accepted.

Infant recipes

Pureed potato, sweet potato or pumpkin

½ cup (200g) peeled and chopped potato, sweet potato or pumpkin.

Boil, steam or microwave until tender, drain. Blend or process with enough breast milk, formula or cooled boiled water until desired level of consistency.

Can be refrigerated for two days or frozen in individual portions.

Can be mixed with mashed avocado.

Pureed apple or pear

1 medium apple or 1 small pear, peeled, cored, chopped.

Boil, steam or microwave until tender, drain, reserving 1 tablespoon of cooking liquid. Blend or process fruit with cooking liquid or cooled boiled water until smooth.

Can be refrigerated for two days or frozen in individual portions.

Toddlers

Children grow at a rapid rate in the first two years of life. In the first six months, fat is an important nutrient for brain development and growth. Breast milk or infant formula have half of their kilojoules coming from fat.

A wide variety of foods rich in essential nutrients and providing adequate kilojoules are needed for normal growth and development. Cereals, breads, fruit and vegetables provide vitamins, minerals, fibre and energy for good health. Milk, yoghurt, cheese, lean meat, fish, poultry, eggs, legumes and nuts also provide essential nutrients such as protein, minerals and vitamins.

While children have definite likes and dislikes, parents should offer a wide variety of foods and encourage the tasting of new foods without forcing the issue. New foods may need to be offered many times before the child accepts the new food.

The normal eating habits of a toddler

Parents often get concerned when their toddler refuses the food they have prepared. This behaviour is quite common and is very unlikely to result in the child eating too little (your child health nurse can plot the child's growth to confirm normal weight and height for age).

- **Toddlers will often reject new foods that you offer. This is quite normal. You may need to offer that same food a number of times over the next month before the child will try it.**
- **Parents can offer a range of nutritious foods; children will choose the foods they wish to eat. Remember that toddlers will eat only when hungry and will eat until they are full. Accept that this may not always correspond with family eating times.**
- **Appetite can vary a lot throughout the day and between days. By the time the evening meal is served the child can be tired and not willing to eat a lot.**
- **Let toddlers explore their food, even if this means a little mess and eating with fingers. The use of a spoon will come with time.**
- **Young children may prefer raw vegetables to chew, rather than cooked vegetables. In warm weather, some even prefer frozen vegetables. Allow for changing tastes of children.**



Healthy food and eating habits to encourage

Eating habits established in childhood may be important in avoiding chronic diseases later in life. Some healthy habits to encourage are:

- Offer small serves on the plate. The child will ask for more if they are still hungry.
- Encourage children to eat slowly and to stop when they are full. It is best not to coerce children to 'eat everything on the plate' as the child may learn that the amount of food remaining on the plate, not a feeling of fullness, determines how much should be eaten. This may lead to over-eating.
- Rejecting any new food is perfectly normal. Retry the food a number of times, every two to three days. It may take 5–10 offerings before a new food is accepted.
- Try not to force children to eat certain foods, even if they are nutritious. Children often grow to dislike foods they are forced to eat. This tends to put them off the food for life. Children can choose their own portion size from wholesome and nutritious meals.
- Don't offer sweet or salty treats as a reward, or withdraw them due to bad behaviour. If food is offered as a reward, then this food will be preferred above others. This only enhances the attention, and demand, for treats. Offer a treat as a small part of healthy eating, without giving it any special value.
- Remember, the most important way to get children to eat well is for parents to have sound eating habits. Over time, your good eating habits will be picked up by the children. Children learn a lot by imitation.
- Encourage toddlers to eat at the table. That way they will pick up table manners, join in conversations and the 'mess' will be confined to a set area.
- Be firm with children who throw food, letting them know this is unacceptable behaviour, but don't punish them.
- Try growing some vegetables in the garden — this is a great way for youngsters to get involved in food and understand the origin of foods.
- Let children be involved in shopping and food preparation. It is easy for a child to select and put mushrooms into a paper bag, or to add cherry tomatoes and cheese cubes to a salad. It takes a little longer and there is a little more mess, but children get a greater appreciation of food and have a sense of ownership.
- Make mealtimes enjoyable and fun.

What foods should be eaten every day?

Here is a guide to the serve sizes that most four year olds will enjoy. Offer a two year old the lower number of serves where a range of serves is suggested.

- **3–6 serves of fruits and vegetables. A maximum of one serve as fruit juice (200ml; it can be diluted with water). 1 serve of vegetables = ½ cup vegetables; ½ cup baked beans; 1 small potato. 1 serve of fruit = 1 medium fruit; 1 cup tinned fruit.**
- **3–5 slices of bread, or the equivalent eg. 1 slice of bread = ½ a cup of breakfast cereal; ½ a cup of cooked rice or pasta.**
- **600ml of milk or the equivalent, eg 600ml calcium-enriched soy milk; 2 slices cheese and 200g yoghurt.**
- **2 small serves of meat, chicken, eggs, fish or legumes, such as baked beans.**

Example toddler menu

Breakfast

Cereal and HiLo milk and fruit, or

Toast and peanut butter

Morning Tea

Slice of cheese and diced fruit

Lunch

Baked beans and noodles and grated cheese, or

Sandwiches with meat and a scrape of margarine, or

Cheese, tomato and lettuce

Glass of milk

Afternoon Tea

Yoghurt, or

Banana, or

Peanut butter sandwich

Dinner

Mince meat and vegetables, or

Chopped chicken and vegetables

Suitable snacks

Eating snacks is very normal for young children. Generally, they cannot eat enough food at meal times to provide enough energy and nutrients for the day. It is quite normal for a toddler to eat small amounts of food 6–8 times a day. Teach your child how to be a smart snacker:

- **Cut up whole fruit into slices or chunks. Toddlers can be put off at the sight of what appears to be a huge apple.**
- **Rather than a round of sandwiches, offer a sandwich cut into quarters. The quarters that aren't eaten can be wrapped and refrigerated for later.**
- **Cheese sticks.**
- **Milk, flavoured milk.**
- **Smoothie (milk with blended tinned/fresh fruit).**
- **Flavoured yoghurt (low fat suitable for children over two years).**
- **Tinned fruit and yoghurt.**
- **Toast and peanut butter or avocado.**
- **Toast and melted cheese.**
- **Baked beans on toast.**
- **Sandwiches.**

Suitable drinks

The best two drinks for toddlers are water and milk. Water to quench their thirst and milk for calcium, riboflavin and protein. Only one glass (200ml) of fruit juice a day is recommended, and this can be diluted. It doesn't really matter if the juice is 100% juice, freshly squeezed or a fruit juice drink. They have similar nutrients and sugar levels, although the flavour may be different. Occasionally, it is fine to offer flavoured milk in place of plain milk. It has all the nutrients of plain milk.

Extra fluids, such as vitamin C-containing syrups and soft drinks, are not required (one glass of soft drink at a party is okay, but don't make them a regular part of the diet).



Toddler recipe

Mushroom and pea risotto

4 cups chicken stock

30g polyunsaturated margarine

1 tbsp chopped parsley

300g mixed mushrooms, sliced

300g (1½ cups) Arborio rice

125g (1 cup) frozen peas

80g (1 cup) shaved Parmesan cheese

Melt butter in a large, deep saucepan and add parsley and mushrooms. Cook over medium heat for 5 minutes until mushrooms have softened. Add rice and cook for 1 minute, stirring constantly to coat the grains.

Add prepared heated stock, one ladleful at a time, stirring until almost all liquid has been absorbed before adding the next ladle. Continue to add stock until it has been incorporated and rice is tender. Add peas with last addition of stock. Remove risotto from heat and stir through Parmesan cheese.

Serves 4. Can be frozen.



Other toddler dietary considerations

Foods not to give toddlers

There are some foods that are easily inhaled and can lodge in the airways of toddlers. It is generally recommended not to give toddlers small round foods like popcorn, hard lollies, raw carrots, raw apple and nuts without strict supervision. Make sure the child sits down near you while eating such foods, as choking is more likely when a child is running or falling.

Low fat diets

Children should never be placed on highly restrictive diets as this will slow growth and development. For example, a diet that is very low in fat will also be low in kilojoules and a toddler will not be able to eat the extra food needed to meet their energy needs. Many fat-containing foods are very nutritious and healthy, eg. peanut butter, avocado, cheese.

It is still smart to restrict the number of high saturated fat foods children eat, eg. biscuits, cakes, pastries, snack foods.

(Saturated fat is the type of fat linked to future heart disease.)

Of course, limiting the amount of high fat foods will help your child to control their weight. Once again, look at your own eating habits. If you eat biscuits every day, then your child will expect to as well.

Allergy

Allergies occur in about six out of 100 children, and are more common in families with a history of allergy. A food allergy is an immune reaction, usually to the protein in a food. The common culprits are milk, soy, eggs, fish, wheat and peanuts. A true milk allergy is rare and, when it does occur, it usually disappears by the time the child is five years old, while fish or peanut allergy may be for life.

As milk is a major calcium source for most children, when milk cannot be consumed, a calcium-fortified soy beverage can be substituted. An allergy should be properly diagnosed by a physician, as what looks like an allergy can be an infection or a food intolerance. If an allergy is diagnosed then an Accredited Practising Dietitian can help arrange a nutritious diet without the offending food.

Iron needs

Iron deficiency anaemia is the most common nutritional deficiency in childhood.

A common cause is when parents rely on two nutritious foods, milk and fruit juice, to provide most of the nutrition for their child.

As neither of these foods provide iron, it is easy for the child to become iron deficient. A toddler requires no more than 600ml milk and 200ml fruit juice each day. The rest of the diet can consist of water to drink and solid foods. Infant cereals, breakfast cereals fortified with iron, meat and poultry are all good sources of iron.

Dental health

Once the first teeth erupt at around six months, they become susceptible to decay caused by bacteria in the mouth. The bacteria convert starch and sugars around the teeth to an acid that decays teeth. For this reason, infants should not be put to bed with a bottle in their mouth or allowed to fall asleep at the breast. The sugars in the milk or juice will be converted by the bacteria in the mouth to acid, which will then cause tooth decay. Clean a child's teeth twice each day with a soft toothbrush and a low fluoride children's toothpaste. Children will need help to clean their teeth until about six years old.

Hyperactivity

Children are naturally 'hyperactive', especially at parties and social gatherings. For a very small number of children, hyperactivity may be due to a food intolerance. It is universally agreed that sugar does not cause hyperactivity. If you feel that your child always acts impulsively, is unable to pay attention for more than a few minutes, and has difficulty sleeping, then seek the help of a paediatrician. Otherwise, the 'hyperactivity' you see might be just an energetic day.

Vegetarianism

Many parents follow a vegetarian diet and would prefer that their children be vegetarian too. A vegetarian diet that avoids meat, poultry and fish, but still includes milk, yoghurt, cheese and eggs can readily provide adequate nutrition for a young child.

However, a vegan diet that excludes all animal foods, including dairy foods and eggs, probably will not provide a child with the full requirements of vitamin B12, iron, calcium, zinc and the energy for normal growth. We suggest you see an Accredited Practising Dietitian for advice, as supplementation of these essential nutrients may be required.

Looking for health advice?

HBF aims to improve the health and wellbeing of everyone in the WA community. To do this we have developed the Community Health Advocacy Program, which encourages people to adopt healthy lifestyle practises.

As part of this program, HBF supports a number of community health events and provides access to health information at www.hbf.com.au and through the HBF Family Doctor.

To find out more or to download a copy of Toddler Food, please visit www.hbf.com.au and follow the links to the HBF Family Doctor pages.

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