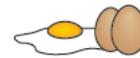


Good food habits

Nutrition is particularly important in the early years. A combination of eating regular healthy meals and snacks can reduce the risk of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, stroke and cancers, so children are more likely to live longer and healthier lives.

Most young children have small stomachs so they need to eat little and often, through a combination of three meals and two to three healthy snacks. As a parent, it is our job to help build children's awareness of nutrition and support their development through a balanced diet; and good habits can be started early.

The terms 'balanced' and 'nutritious' mean similar things for children and adults alike. However, children under 5 need less fibre and more fat (for energy) than older children and adults.



Serving a variety of foods enables children to widen their tastes and explore different textures and combinations, while ensuring they get all the nutrients they need.

This table provides the recommended daily guidelines for children:

Food groups	Examples of food included	Main nutrients provided	Recommended servings
Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates	Bread, potatoes and sweet potatoes, starchy root vegetables, pasta, noodles, rice, other grains, breakfast cereals	Carbohydrate, fibre, B vitamins and iron	Four portions each day Provide a portion as part of each meal (breakfast, lunch and tea) and provide as part of at least one snack each day
Fruit and vegetables	Fresh, frozen, canned, dried and juiced fruit and vegetables, and pulses	Carotenes (a form of vitamin A), vitamin C, zinc, iron, and fibre	Five portions each day Provide a portion as part of each main meal (breakfast, lunch and tea) and with some snacks
Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins	Meat, poultry, fish, shellfish, eggs, meat alternatives, pulses, nuts*	Protein, iron, zinc, omega 3 fatty acids, vitamins A and D	Two portions each day Provide a portion as part of lunch and tea (Two to three portions for vegetarian children)
Dairy and alternatives	Milk, cheese, yoghurt, fromage frais, custard, puddings made from milk	Protein, calcium, and vitamin A	Three portions each day. Provided as part of meals, snacks and drinks

< 5g
sugar

< 0.3g
salt

< 1.5g
saturates

There are three nutrients in food to limit in a child's diet: **saturated fat; sugar and salt.**

Cooking from scratch, where possible, will help reduce levels as many prepared, manufactured, foods are high in these nutrients. But when buying foods, do check labels, ideally they should contain less than 1.5g of saturates; less than 0.3g salt or less than 5g sugar per 100g.

Top Tips

- **Encouragement is key**, get them involved in food preparation; laying the table; or take them shopping for ingredients – children are much more likely to eat food if they have helped make it
- **Pre-plan menus** – this will not just help children receive a healthy balanced diet; but will also help limit food wastage. Consider a menu cycle of three to four weeks of meals to ensure variety
- **Model healthy eating** - far too often children are offered healthy food only for adults to make less healthy choices, make sure you lead by example
- **Encourage children to try new foods** by putting food into serving bowls and allowing your child to help themselves. Or give them a small amount of food on a small plate so they are not overwhelmed by the amount of food in front of them
- **Make mealtimes enjoyable** - children who are supported by familiar adults at mealtimes, in a calm, sociable environment, where eating is encouraged but not forced are much more likely to try new foods and eat better
- **Don't pressurise children** into eating something that they are unsure of. Sometimes children are anxious about trying new foods and they need the time to find out what it smells, feels and looks like before having a taste and swallowing it
- **Encourage children to be active** and engage in physical play – help them work up an appetite
- **Teach children about where food comes from** - either by visiting local markets and shops or consider growing fruit and vegetables.

Often parents can get stuck in a rut when it comes to meal times; or when faced with a fussy eater start limiting the variety of food being offered.

But there is so much more to food than just eating. Involving children in the food 'journey'; from produce to plate can help foster positive attitudes to food.

Mealtimes that are carefully planned for can provide opportunities for children to learn about the world around them; develop mathematical and physical skills; be creative and be sociable. Children then have the opportunity to listen and talk and develop a love of food that will stay with them as they grow.

More information

[Eat Better, Start Better](#)
[Change4life](#)

PACEY (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years) pacey.org.uk/parents