



Healthy eating for kindergarten

Children's eating is not only influenced by family life, but also by other children and messages from television. Children can learn to make healthy food and lifestyle choices if given help from parents and carers.

Eating patterns

Once children commence kindergarten, life takes on a new routine. A regular intake of food is needed throughout the day to help keep children active and concentrate while learning. Offer regular meals and snacks, and allow your child to eat according to appetite without force or arguments.

Kindergarten children need a range of foods from the following groups:

- fruit and vegetables
- breads and cereals
- meat, fish, chicken, eggs, legumes
- milk, cheese and yoghurt.

Growth

Children grow at a steady rate during the kindergarten years. Low fat or restricted diets are not recommended because children's energy and nutrient needs are high.

For parents who are concerned about excessive weight gain, a good approach is to:

- develop healthy eating habits for the whole family
- encourage regular physical activities for everyone—aim for one hour of activity per day

Appetite

Children can sense how much food their bodies need and will eat enough to match this, but they can lose this natural ability if forced to eat.

Encouraging children to 'clean the plate' or giving sweets as a reward can lead to longer-term problems of overeating.

Offer your child small serves to start, and give more if they are still hungry. Remember that meal sizes and overall food intake may vary day to day depending on your child's activity levels and appetite.

Trust your child to decide how much food is enough. This shouldn't cause problems if a variety of healthy foods are offered.



Physical activity

Children should be encouraged to be physically active, for around one hour per day, from a young age. Being active everyday can help children to maintain a healthy weight, help protect against diseases in later life, improve concentration and boost their self-esteem and confidence. Encourage your child to do something active each day. This does not only mean being involved in organised events, but also spending less time sitting down or being inactive each day.

As a family try to:

- walk instead of taking the car, when possible
- restrict the amount of TV time, computer and other screen games to no more than two hours per day
- do something physical and active together; walk the dog, throw a Frisbee, play in the park, or go bush walking
- encourage your child to play games outside and join in when you can
- involve your child in active hobbies such as swimming, dancing or junior sports
- participate in kindergarten activities.

Remember to be a role model for your child and be active in your own daily life.

Family mealtimes

Sitting down to eat, as a family, is a great chance to spend time together and talk about the day's activities and events. Take time to eat together and relax at mealtimes, even if only a few times during the week or at weekends. Try a late breakfast or lunch on the weekend with all the family together.

At mealtimes:

- encourage talking and sharing of daytime activities
- avoid distractions such as TV, radio or the telephone
- let your child decide when they are full, don't argue about food
- discuss some simple nutrition messages such as 'milk helps keep your teeth and bones strong'.

Meals for kindergarten

Children continue to learn new skills and ideas about food when eating away from home. They can be involved in preparing their lunch box and helping their carers make healthy snacks and lunches. Making meals together can also be an educational and fun activity.

Suggestions include:

- a sandwich, fresh fruit and a tub of yoghurt
- lean meat and salad in pita bread, with tinned fruit and plain milk
- milk, yoghurt and water can be frozen in hot weather .

Healthy snacks

Snacks are an important part of a child's food intake. What children eat is more important than when they eat. As a guide, plan for your child to have three main meals and two to three snacks per day. Try and encourage at least 1½ – 2 hours between each meal and snack.

Some ideas for healthy and interesting snacks are:

- fresh or tinned fruit. Dried fruit is sticky and high in sugar, so only offer occasionally
- bread, crackers or rice cakes with spreads such as peanut butter or vegemite
- cheese slices, cubes, sticks or triangles
- dip, salsa or hummus served with crackers or vegetable sticks (make sure children are seated and supervised)

- yoghurt (can be frozen)
- raisin bread, fruit loaf or toasted English muffins
- plain biscuits, scones or pikelets
- fruit or vegetable muffins, such as sultana, carrot, banana, zucchini, pumpkin
- fruit smoothies.

Sometimes foods

By this age children are starting to enjoy the social aspects of food. Having friends often means your child will be eating away from home more, going to parties, and eating at fast food restaurants. While occasional lollies, chips and take away foods do no harm, if eaten too often they can result in:

- poor intake of other nourishing foods
- high energy intake and the risk of overweight
- increased risk of tooth decay
- constipation.

Enjoy these foods from time to time, at parties or occasionally with the rest of the family.

Healthy drinks

Active children need plenty of fluids. Encourage children to have water as their main drink. Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drink are not needed for a healthy diet and are not recommended. For more information see *Why no sweet drinks*.

Three serves of dairy food are needed each day to provide enough calcium for bone development; a serve equals a glass of milk, a tub of yoghurt or a slice of cheese. Reduced fat milk or dairy products can be offered to children over two years of age, whilst skim milk or dairy products can be offered to children over five years of age.

Important tips for kindergarten children

- Offer a wide variety of foods every day.
- Encourage healthy eating for everyone in the family.
- Let your child decide if they are full or hungry.
- Offer healthy snacks between meals.
- Encourage children to help prepare meals.
- Encourage water as the main drink.
- Enjoy family mealtime and activities together.
- Encourage physical activities for the whole family.
- Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drink are not necessary.

For more information about child nutrition visit:
www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au