

Child nutrition - juices and sweet drinks

Sweet drinks include all fruit juices, soft drinks, cordials, energy drinks, sports drinks and flavoured mineral waters; either bought or homemade. Fruit juice contains sugars that are found naturally in fresh fruits, but become very concentrated when made into juice. Other sweet drinks have large amounts of sugars added. Under most circumstances, children don't need any fruit juice or other sweet drinks to have a balanced and healthy diet.

Too many sweet drinks can lead to a range of problems including excessive weight gain, tooth decay, diarrhoea or a small appetite. If you wish to include sweet drinks in your child's diet, limit consumption to one small glass a day. However, this is not necessary for good health.

Milk for children

While breast, formula and cows milk contain the sugar lactose, they're not considered to be sweet drinks. Milk is important for children as it contains calcium needed for healthy bones and teeth. For children less than 12 months old, breast milk or infant formula should be the main drink. Only offer plain full cream milk after 12 months, when your child has reduced breastfeeding or formula

Water is preferred for toddlers and older children, so encourage this. While milk is important for calcium, too much can lead to poor appetite – about three glasses a day is recommended. Artificially sweetened or flavoured milk drinks are not recommended.

Fresh fruit is best

Luckily, it takes only half an orange to provide the vitamin C your child needs. Encourage children to eat fresh fruit instead of drinking juice. This will:

- Help with skills such as peeling and chewing
- Teach about different textures, colours and tastes
- Supply fibre to the diet and help prevent constipation.

Problems with sweet drinks

Too many sweet drinks can cause a range of problems including:

- Excessive weight gain
- Tooth decay
- Small appetite
- Picky eating
- Change in bowel habits.

Excess weight gain

Sweet drinks are high in energy (kilojoules) and may contribute to excessive weight gain in children if consumed regularly in large amounts.

Tooth decay

Children who have sweet drinks such as cordial, soft drink and juice regularly are at risk of tooth decay. For babies and toddlers, problems start when a bottle is used for comfort when going to sleep, to suck during the night or to snack on during the day. If the bottle contains any drink other than water – even milk – the sugars in the fluid sit on the teeth and gums for some time. This is when decay can start, even before any teeth have broken through. Avoid using a feeding bottle for comfort and encourage your child to start drinking from a cup from about six months of age.

Small appetite or picky eaters

Sweet drinks contain energy (kilojoules) and can fill children up, making them less hungry for other foods. For picky eaters, stopping or limiting sweet drinks is a helpful way to encourage your child's hunger so that they eat more.

Sweet drinks are lacking in protein, fat, iron and calcium needed for a child's growth. When consumed too often, sweet drinks may cause a low intake of nutrients. Problems such as iron deficiency, anaemia and failure to thrive may occur in babies and toddlers who replace food such as breast milk, formula or solids with sweet drinks.

Change in bowel habits

Young children may have problems digesting some of the sugars in sweet drinks, which can lead to loose bowel motions and diarrhoea. This may cause slow growth if energy and nutrients are regularly lost from the body. When sweet drinks are removed from the child's diet, bowel actions may improve.

Suggestions for parents

Changing your child's diet can be a challenge, but remember that young children can only eat or drink what is given to them. Suggestions include:

- Avoid using a baby's bottle to settle your child to sleep.
- Be a role model by not keeping sweet drinks in the house or consuming sweet drinks yourself.
- If your child is already used to sweet drinks, start to reduce their intake – for example, you could offer watered-down versions for a short time and then move on to water.
- Be patient. This may take time, particularly if your child is in the habit of wanting juice or cordial whenever they are thirsty or hungry.
- Encourage your child to eat fresh fruit instead of drinking fruit juice.
- If you wish to include sweet drinks in your child's diet, limit consumption to one small glass a day.
- Visit your local doctor or health centre if you have any concerns about your child's health or growth.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- An Accredited Practising Dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia
- Parent Line Tel. 13 22 89
- Maternal and Child Health Line Tel. 13 22 29 – available 24 hours a day for the cost of a local call throughout Victoria
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)

Things to remember

- Fruit juice, soft drinks, cordial and other sweet drinks are not necessary.
- Encourage your child to drink water and eat fruit.
- If you wish to include sweet drinks in your child's diet, limit consumption to one small glass per day.
- Be patient. It takes time to make changes to your child's diet.

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