

Child nutrition - juices and sweet drinks

Sweet drinks include all fruit juices, soft drinks and cordials either bought or homemade. These drinks contain sugars that are found naturally in fresh fruits, but become very concentrated when made into juice or when used to make soft drinks or cordials. 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 tooth decay, diarrhoea and 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.

Breast, formula and cows milk

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. For children less than 12 months old, breast milk or infant formula should be the main drink. Offer plain full cream milk only after 12 months, when your child has reduced breastfeeding or formula.

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

Fresh fruit is best

As juice comes from fresh fruit, it is easy to believe it is a natural, healthy food that's full of vitamins. Luckily, it takes only half an orange or half a glass of juice a day to give the vitamin C your child needs.

Children should be encouraged 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.

A range of problems

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

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

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 sugar in the fluid sits 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

Sweet drinks don't contain the protein, fat, iron or calcium needed for a child's growth. They are full of energy (kilojoules) and can fill children up, making them less hungry for other foods. 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.

Picky eating

Sweet drinks are filling. For picky eaters, stopping or limiting sweet drinks is a helpful way to encourage your child's hunger so that they eat more.

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. The result may include impaired growth if energy and nutrients are regularly lost from the body. When sweet drinks are removed from the child's diet, loose 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.
- Don't keep sweet drinks in the house.
- Don't consume 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.
- If your child gets upset, remember that they will get used to the changes if you continue.
- 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
- Maternal and Child Health nurse
- Maternal and Child Health line (24 hours) Tel. 132 229
- Parentline (24 hours) Tel. 132 289

Things to remember

- Fruit juice, soft drinks, cordial and other sweet drinks are unnecessary.
- 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.
- Changing your child's diet can be a challenge, but remember that young children can only eat or drink what is given to them.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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