

Eating tips for children (3) - older toddlers

After their second birthday, older toddlers continue to develop new eating skills and food habits. At times, older toddlers can be erratic eaters; they love food one day and dislike it the next. The meal they refused at home is eaten happily away from home. This can frustrate and baffle parents, but it's a common eating pattern for a healthy and active older toddler. Very few children pass through these years without creating some worry and concern about eating.

Toddlers need a variety of foods daily from the following groups: fruit and vegetables, breads and cereals, meat, fish, chicken, eggs and legumes, and milk, cheese and yoghurt, for good health and growth. Reduced-fat dairy products can be included for toddlers two years or older, but avoid no-fat dairy products in this age group. Restricted diets are not recommended for toddlers, as they may limit the energy and nutrients needed for growth and development.

Appetite and hunger can vary considerably

Toddlers have changeable appetites. Growth spurts and changing activity levels during the day can result in a large appetite for a while, followed by small and picky eating soon after. The evening meal may cause the most concern, when children may be tired or not hungry.

Some other common reasons for irregular food intake include:

- Filling up on drinks – in particular, sweet drinks or milk
- Being either too tired to eat or not preferring the food served at that meal
- Frequent snacking – this can curb the appetite for main meals, although it generally isn't a problem if the snacks are nutritious.

Food refusal

Most children are able to balance food intake with activity if they are encouraged, but not forced to eat. You can help by providing a variety of healthy and nourishing foods from which your child can choose. Offer children the same foods as the family, with a variety of textures and flavours for balanced nutrition.

If a food is refused, the child may not be objecting to the actual food, but may be testing to see the effect they have on people around them. By assuming the food is to blame, some parents can get caught up in a frustrating game. Some helpful tips to deal with food refusal include:

- Try to stay calm.
- Don't force your child to eat.
- Allow your child some likes and dislikes.
- Offer new foods with familiar ones.
- Provide a small spoon or fork and a comfortable chair.
- Turn off the television – chat at mealtimes instead.
- Start with a small serve and give more if hungry.
- If a meal is refused, let your child sit quietly for a few minutes before leaving the table.
- Be a role model for your child. If you eat well, they may copy you.

Have fun with food

You can use food activities with older toddlers to help them learn about foods and nutrition. Letting children get involved in basic food preparation – like washing or peeling vegetables, making a sandwich or salad, or baking fruit or vegetable muffins – teaches them about healthy foods. Other learning opportunities include:

- Exploration of shapes, colours and how foods grow
- Development of skills like pouring, stirring and cutting
- Learning food hygiene, like washing hands before touching food or eating
- Sharing food with other people.

Healthy snacks

Snacks between meals are an important part of the day for young children, so keep these as healthy, nutritious and as interesting as possible. Suggestions include:

- Fresh and dried fruits
- Crackers with cheese or hummus
- Yoghurt (this can be frozen in hot weather in place of ice cream)
- Raisin bread, fruit loaf or toasted muffins
- Plain biscuits, scones or buns
- Dip and biscuits or vegetable sticks – remember that hard vegetables should be thinly sliced, grated or steamed for children under three years of age to reduce the risk of choking.

Always sit with and supervise children during meals and snacks, and enjoy meals together.

Healthy drinks

For some children who are busy playing and exploring, drinks may replace food or snacks. When appetites are small, this may reduce the amount or variety of foods eaten, or may affect the child's growth. Milk and dairy foods are an important part of a child's diet; about three small cups of milk each day provide a good amount of calcium for strong bones and teeth. . Water should be offered at other times. Sweet drinks such as juice and cordials aren't needed.

Childcare and food

Childcare provides an environment for children to eat with others and experience new foods and tastes. Some parents may find that their toddler is tired at the end of the day and less interested in the evening meal. This will vary for each child.

Always ask about your child's eating habits from childcare staff, as well as giving them important information about your concerns or problems at home. Working together with childcare staff can positively reinforce healthy food messages and eating for your child.

Tips for feeding older toddlers

Suggestions include:

- Offer a variety of foods daily from the main food groups.
- Enjoy eating together as a family.
- Don't force your child to eat when tired or not hungry.
- Offer water to drink. Sweet drinks like juice or cordial are not needed.
- Offer healthy snacks between meals.
- Involve your child in simple meal preparation.
- Accept some food refusal without worry.
- Be a role model for your child and eat a healthy diet.

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

- Most older toddlers are able to balance food intake with activity if they are not forced to eat.
- Children should be served the same foods as the rest of the family, with a variety of textures and flavours for balanced nutrition.
- Snacks between meals are an important part in the day for young children, so keep these as healthy, nutritious and as interesting as possible.
- Encourage active play and limit screen time.

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

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