

Eating tips for children (4) - preschoolers

Once children start kindergarten or school, life takes on a new routine. A regular intake of food is needed throughout the day to keep children active and help their concentration while learning. Some children in this age group are still fussy, so offer a wide variety of foods and regular meals and snacks, and allow the child to eat according to their appetite without force or arguments.

Allow your child to eat according to their appetite

Children are able to decide how much food they need for activity and growth if allowed to eat according to their appetite. Forcing children to 'clean the plate' or giving sweets as rewards may lead to problems of overeating later in life.

Allow your child to decide how much food is enough. This shouldn't cause problems for most children if a variety of healthy foods are consistently offered. Offer a small serve first and give your child more if they are hungry. Meal sizes will vary, as the amount of food a child needs depends on what else has been eaten during the day.

Meals for kindergarten

Children continue to learn new skills and ideas about food when eating outside the home. They can be involved in preparing their lunch box and helping their carers make healthy lunches. Preparing meals together is a great opportunity to give children positive messages about nutrition, such as 'milk makes your bones strong' or 'bread gives you energy to play'. Suggestions for lunches include:

- Mixed sandwich, fresh fruit and a tub of yoghurt
- Lean meat and salad in pita bread, with dried fruit and a carton of plain milk
- Dairy foods and drinks can be frozen in hot weather and taken to kindergarten.

Healthy snack suggestions

Snacks are an important part of a child's food intake for energy and nutrients. What children eat is more important than when they eat. Children who snack on lollies and chips may not get all the nutrients needed for good health. Healthy snack suggestions include:

- Fresh and dried fruits, or fruit packed in natural juice
- Yoghurt or cheese
- Fruit bread, bun or muffins
- Bread, rice cakes or crackers with spread
- Vegetable pieces and dip.

Treats are best kept for special occasions

By this age, children can eat independently and enjoy the social aspects of eating. Having friends means eating out of home more. There may be an occasional meal at a fast food restaurant. They may go to a party with lots of sugary and fatty snacks. These things will do no harm as long as good nutrition is continued on most days. Food is an important part of special occasions for everyone and should be enjoyed. However, high energy treats are best kept for special occasions and are not recommended for lunch boxes.

Strict diets aren't recommended

Children grow at a steady rate during the kindergarten and early school years. Strict or low-fat diets are not recommended because children's energy and nutrient needs are high. If you're concerned about excessive weight gain, a good approach is to:

- Consult with your doctor.
- Develop healthy eating habits for the whole family.
- Encourage regular physical activities for everyone.
- Limit the time spent watching television.

Encourage physical activity

Children should be encouraged to be physically active from a young age. Physical activity helps children feel good and promotes a healthy appetite. For this age group, three hours per day of active play spread out over the day is recommended and only one hour or less of television or DVD watching. While formal sports aren't necessary for fitness, children can benefit from your encouragement and guidance. Suggestions include:

- Watch less television.
- Play games in the back garden or a local park.
- Go for a walk to the park or playground.
- Teach your child to swim.
- Participate in kindergarten and school activities.
- Be involved in regular, fun activities with your children.

Healthy drinks

Active children need plenty of fluids. Around three glasses of milk a day provides enough calcium for bone development; water should be encouraged at other times. Sweet drinks such as juice, soft drink or cordial are unnecessary in a child's diet. Low-fat milk can be combined with fresh fruits for a smoothie as a great afternoon snack.

Food tips for growing children

General suggestions include:

- Offer a 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.
- Involve children in meal preparation.
- Encourage water rather than sweet drinks.
- Enjoy family mealtimes and activities together.

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

- Children are able to decide how much food they need for activity and growth if allowed to eat according to their appetite.
- Strict or low-fat diets are not recommended because children's energy and nutrient needs are high.
- High energy treats are best kept for special occasions and are not recommended for lunch boxes.
- Reduce screen time and encourage active play.

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

Royal Children's Hospital - Nutrition Department

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2012 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.