

# Eating Tips for Feeding Your Toddler or Preschooler



When your toddler (1-3 years) or preschooler (3-5 years) eats well they will have the nutrients they need to grow, learn and develop. You can teach your child to eat well by offering a variety of foods and by being a good role model.

There may be times when your child will refuse to eat part or all of the family meal or eat only certain foods. While this can be frustrating or worrisome it is normal for toddlers and preschoolers to modify what and how much they eat. Your child's appetite will vary from day to day depending on the eating environment (for example, at home or at day care), if they are growing (growth spurt), physically active, tired, teething, sick or trying to develop their own sense of self.

Help your child to eat well, develop healthy eating habits and avoid mealtime struggles by sharing the feeding responsibility and following the steps below.

## Sharing the Responsibility

Parents and children have different jobs in feeding. Follow this advice to help your child learn to eat a variety of foods.

### **The parent's/caregiver's job is to decide:**

- What food and drinks are served. Make one family meal, not different meals. When you eat and serve a variety of healthy foods based on Canada's Food Guide, your child will learn to eat these foods too.
- When food is served. When children eat at set times they are more likely to come to the table hungry and try new foods.
- Where food is served. Children will eat healthier when you eat together at the table.

### **Your child's job is to decide:**

- If and how much to eat from the food and drinks you have served. Trust that your child knows when they are hungry or full.

# Steps you can take

1

## **Eat together as often as possible.**

This helps to teach your child healthy eating habits, table manners and how to use utensils. It also provides a time to role model healthy eating.

2

## **Keep mealtimes pleasant and relaxed.**

This is a time for your child to learn and explore how to feed themselves. They may use their fingers and the area may get messy with food falling to the floor. Don't expect good table manners yet. At this stage you want your child to come to the table happy to eat.

3

## **Set regular meal and snack times to help your child develop a healthy routine.**

- Offer 3 meals and 2-3 snacks at regular times each day. See the meal and snack ideas on this page.
- Do not let your child **graze** or eat frequently at all times of the day.
- Offer only water in between meals and snacks. This will help your child come to the table hungry and ready to try new foods. Even a little milk or a few crackers can spoil your child's appetite. Offer only 125 mL (½ cup) of milk at a meal or snack, then water if your child is still thirsty.
- Give your child about 20 minutes to eat.
  - If your child refuses a meal or does not eat anything in about 10-15 minutes, calmly remove the food. Let your child down from the table to play quietly while the rest of the family finishes eating.

## Healthy meal ideas

- Cut up meatballs in tomato sauce with pasta and squash
- Scrambled eggs, strips of whole grain toast with diced melon
- Whole wheat pita with thinly spread smooth nut butter, diced banana and 3.25% homogenized whole milk
- Brown rice with ground beef, cooked and chopped bok choy and carrots
- Tuna sandwich with tomato and apple slices
- Baked sweet potato with shredded chicken, cooked broccoli florets and melted cheese
- Congee or rice porridge with small pieces of meat, chicken, or fish with cut up mandarin orange slices
- Whole wheat chapatti with channa (chickpea curry), cooked vegetables and plain yogurt

## Healthy snack ideas

- Steamed edamame (green soy bean pods), peas and corn with feta cheese
- Sliced strawberries and pineapple with yogurt dip
- Strips of whole grain bread or toast with avocado or thinly spread smooth nut butter
- Yogurt and small oatmeal muffin
- Hummus (chickpea dip) with soft cooked zucchini strips and cauliflower florets
- Cubed cheese with sliced plums and pears
- O-shaped oat cereal or brown rice puffs with yogurt and fresh cut berries
- Black bean dip with whole grain crackers or roti

**4****Seat your child at the table securely in a high chair or booster seat for meals and snacks without distractions such as the phone, TV, computer, radio and toys.**

This helps you and your child to focus on eating and can avoid choking if your child is running about and eating at the same time.

**5****Don't make separate meals for your child.**

Your child will not learn to eat a variety of food if you only serve what they like to eat. Try to serve one food you know your child will eat (for example, cereal, milk, rice, potatoes) to ensure they won't be hungry.

**6****Offer a variety of foods at each meal**

- Focus on providing:
  - Colourful vegetables and fruit. Offer fruit instead of juice. It has more nutrients and fibre.
  - Whole grains such as barley, oats, enriched pasta, bread and cereal.
  - Dairy products like milk, yogurt and cheese. Serve 3.25% homogenized whole milk until 24 months after which you can switch to lower fat milk or fortified soy beverage. If you have any questions about balancing human milk, cow's milk and fortified beverages speak to your health care provider or dietitian.
  - Lean meats, poultry, eggs, nut butters, dried beans, peas, lentils and tofu.
- Fish and shellfish including lower mercury varieties such as anchovy, capelin, char, hake, herring, Atlantic mackerel, mullet, pollock, salmon, smelt, rainbow trout, lake whitefish, blue crab, shrimp, clams, mussels, oysters and canned light tuna.
  - Limit the amount of higher mercury containing fish including fresh and frozen tuna, orange roughy, catfish, shark, swordfish and marlin.
- New foods, in small amounts, along with familiar food, when your child is healthy and hungry. Try new foods served in different ways such as mashed or soft, cooked carrots or carrots grated into muffins or meatloaf.
  - Don't be discouraged if your child does not like new foods on the first try. It can often take a number of tastes before a child likes a new food.
- Limit foods that are high in added sugar, salt and fat, such as sugary beverages called "fruit cocktail", "fruit punch" or "drink" and soda pop, sweetened cereal, ice cream, cookies, cakes, candy, chocolate, salted crackers, French fries, onion rings, hot dogs, cold cuts or canned soups. They will fill up your child and leave less room for healthier foods.



7

**Trust your child's appetite.**

- Let your toddler decide on how much they want to eat. Your job is to offer healthy choices.
- It is natural for your child's appetite to lower when they are not in a growth spurt. Give smaller portions of a variety of foods and let your child ask for more.
- If you are concerned about your child's growth or appetite, see your health care provider or dietitian.

8

**Avoid pressure, praise, rewards, tricks or punishment.**

Children do not eat well when they feel pressured to eat.

9

**Grow, pick, cook and shop for food together.**

Your child may be more open to trying these foods.

10

**Be active with your toddler.**

Toddlers and preschoolers need to be physically active every day to grow and develop.

- Activity with your toddler can include both indoor and outdoor playtime. Aim for at least 180 minutes (3 hours) of activity each day. Run, jump, dance or play catch or tag with your child to help them develop basic movement skills.
- Limit their time spent in front of the TV and computer.

## Common Questions and Answers

### How do I know if my child is getting enough to eat?

If your child is growing well, seems healthy and happy, they are likely doing fine. When your child grows faster, they will eat more. When they grow slower, they will eat less. There is no need for concern about the odd skipped meal. Contact your health care provider if:

- You are concerned about your child's growth or general health.
- Your child is not drinking about 500 mL (2 cups) of milk or fortified soy beverage or breastfeeding most days. They may not be getting enough calcium and vitamin D.
- Your child refuses certain types of healthy foods for weeks and you are concerned they may not be getting enough nutrients.



## Should I give my child a vitamin-mineral supplement?

Breastfed or partly breastfed toddlers should be given a vitamin D supplement of 400 IU/day until they are two years old.

To help your toddler get enough vitamin D:

- Offer 500-750 mL (2-3 cups) of cow's milk each day. You can offer fortified soy beverage once they are over 24 months.
- Offer other good food sources of vitamin D like fish, egg yolk, soft tub margarine and vitamin D fortified yogurt.
- If your toddler is not drinking milk or vitamin D fortified milk alternatives, give them a supplement of 400 IU of Vitamin D each day.
- Speak to your health care provider or dietitian if you think your toddler may not be getting enough vitamin D.

Most children do not need other vitamin or mineral supplements. Ask your health care provider or dietitian before offering supplements. Whole foods offer more nutrition than supplements can provide.

## What can I do when my child wants a snack and it's not snack time?

Tell your child that they can eat at the next meal or snack time. Offer only water between meal and snack times. Be loving but firm about no food between meals and snacks. Try to redirect your child to another activity.



## My child wants to eat the same thing over and over again. What should I do?

This is a "food jag." It is common and can last several weeks or months. Usually, it is no cause for concern. As long as your child's favourite food is nutritious, continue to offer it to your child. Keep offering a variety of healthy foods. For example, if plain pasta is your child's favourite, you can serve that but also offer cooked frozen peas, hard-cooked eggs, apple slices and milk. In time your child will eat different foods.

## My child gags. Is that normal?

Gagging or coughing food back up is normal. Gagging helps to prevent choking. Choking is not normal. Choking happens when food is not swallowed properly. Help prevent choking by:

- Cutting up food into small pieces, appropriate for your child's age.
- Remind your child to chew their food and eat slowly.
- Ensure that your child is sitting upright, in a seat with a footrest, paying attention to what they are eating, and is not distracted by playing or watching TV while eating. Avoid offering food in the car. Focus on the food and sharing time together.
- Supervising meal and snack times. Choking can happen quickly and unexpectedly.

If gagging, trouble swallowing or choking happens often, contact your health care provider.