



American College of Pediatricians

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Patient Information Handout

HEALTHY EATING

Healthy nutrition is important to a child's growth and general well-being. Eating habits that are learned in childhood will continue into adulthood. Children do not naturally prefer to eat the most nutritious foods, so guidance from parents is essential. This will mean being a good example, establishing some eating guidelines and teaching your child which foods are the healthiest.

Good nutrition requires a division of responsibility between parent and child:

- You decide what, when, and where to eat.
- Your child decides how much to eat.

Your Responsibilities

You select the right foods.

You decide what food goes on the table. Although you will pay some attention to what your children like, don't be enslaved by their food preferences. Prepare one meal for everybody and serve a good variety. Don't short-order cook for your children.

You know more about food and proper eating than your children do. They need to learn from you. It's a mistake to limit the family menu to those foods your children will easily accept.

You decide the proper time for meals and snacks.

Provide three regular meals a day and offer planned snacks between meals. Snacks allow children to come to their regular meals hungry, but not starving. Their stomachs are small and their energy needs are high. Most children need a nutritious boost between meals.

Don't give your children food anytime they ask for it. You must remain in charge of the menu and the timing of meals and snacks. If children fill up on unlimited snacks, juices or milk, they will not be hungry at mealtime and will not feel the urge to eat the variety of foods you serve. A useful guideline is to limit sweet drink (juices, Kool-Aid, etc.) to 4-6 ounces per day for toddlers and preschoolers; encourage water drinking as an alternative.

You decide where your children should eat.

Children should eat only at the table and not in living areas, bedrooms, or in front of the TV.

By eating at the table, children learn to take eating more seriously, and parents are less tempted to give food handouts to pacify hurt feelings and general crankiness.

You provide a pleasant mealtime setting.

Eat together as a family whenever possible. Studies show children eat best if someone they trust eats with them. That grownup should be pleasant and not nag them about their eating. Maintain general order at the table and keep thrilling distractions or riotous laughter to a minimum. Children can forget to eat or even choke. Turn the television off and stimulate pleasant discussion of the day's events. Avoid negative or scolding talk with your child during the meal.

Your Children's Responsibilities

Children can learn to eat a variety of foods.

Offer a variety of foods regularly. Though children may reject certain foods initially, continue to serve them at future meals since their tastes will change. Avoid serving the same "favorite" foods everyday, since this

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discourages children from trying new foods. Be a good example and eat a variety of foods yourself, especially vegetables and fruits.

Children's food preferences will change often.

Children may love a food for a while, then not eat it for months. Or they may eat it some days, but not other days. They may eat only one or two food items at a meal. A daily multivitamin is a useful supplement during stages when few vegetables or fruits are eaten.

Children will eat according to their hunger needs.

Children grow at different rates and into different shapes and sizes. Some days children are hungry and some days they aren't. They may eat an enormous breakfast and snack, then very little the rest of the day. Some days they are more active than other days. You can trust that they will eat what they need, if snacks and beverages are appropriately limited between meals.

So, avoid coercing, nagging, or bribing your children to eat. Require that they sit at the table until everyone is finished eating. If hungry later, offer the planned snack, but avoid randomly giving heavy snacks or desserts after the meal; many children will refuse to eat at mealtime in anticipation of these snacks.

General Guidelines:

- Limit snacks and sweet drink between and after meals. Control your child's access to the pantry or refrigerator. Require that they ask first before getting snacks from the pantry.
- Eat together as a family as often as possible. Be an example of good nutrition.
- Serve a variety of foods at each meal. Serve the same foods to everyone. Don't short-order cook for your child.
- Require that everyone remain seated at the table until all are finished. Require your children ask to be excused. Slowing a child down to eat is half the battle.
- Make mealtime pleasant. Avoid nagging or coercing your child to eat and let the child's natural hunger drive do the work for you.

In summary, do your job, let your children do theirs, and everyone will eat well.

Nutritional Recommendations for the Average Toddler

FOOD GROUP	SERVINGS A DAY	AMOUNT PER SERVING
Milk, cheese, yogurt, & other dairy products *	2 - 3	1 cup milk or equivalent
Meats, poultry, fish, eggs, nuts	2	1 ounce meat, etc. or 1 egg
Vegetables	3 or more	¼ cup
Fruits	2 or more	¼ cup, or ½ piece of fruit
Bread, cereal, rice, pasta, crackers	4 or more	2 slice bread, ¼ - ½ cup rice or pasta, or 1-2 crackers

* Dairy products are the most convenient way to achieve an optimal calcium intake for a child.

Snack Suggestions: fresh fruit (bananas, strawberries, cantaloupe, oranges, apple slices), raw vegetables, bagels, crackers, cheese, yogurt, pretzels, frozen fruit bars, rice cakes, bread/ toast, graham crackers, soups, & turkey slices.