

Nutrition Matters

Tips for Feeding Young Children

It is important that children develop healthy eating habits early in life. Here are some ways to help your child eat well and to make meal times easier.

What to Expect:

- After the first year of life, growth slows down, and your child's appetite may change.
- It's normal for your child to eat more on some days and very little on other days.
- A child may refuse to eat in order to have some control in his life.
- A child may be happy to sit at the table for 15 to 20 minutes and no longer.
- A child may want to eat the same food over and over again.



- **Don't be a "short order cook"**. Serve one meal for everybody with at least one food that you know your child enjoys.
- **Avoid distractions at meal times**. Young children easily get distracted from eating. Try to offer a quiet and pleasant environment at meal times. Eat together with your child whenever possible.
- **Let your child decide**. Once you have provided healthy foods, it is up to your child to decide which foods, and how much, he will eat.

How can I get my child to eat more variety?

How can I encourage my child to eat more?

- **Set regular meal and snack times**. Avoid feeding your child in between these times, so that they are hungry at meal and snack times.
 - **Limit juice and milk between meals**. Offer water between meals, which will satisfy thirst without spoiling the appetite. Serve drinks at the end of the meal.
 - **Respect tiny tummies**. Keep portion sizes small. A good serving size for a young child is 1/2 slice of bread, 1 oz (30 grams) of meat, or 1/4 cup (50 mL) of fruit or vegetable pieces.
 - **Respect changing appetites**. Offer seconds on days when your child seems hungrier and take the unfinished plate away on "slower" days. Be patient and avoid conflicts.
 - **Make every bite count**. Give foods that are high in nutrients, like peanut butter, cheese, chicken, eggs, beans, vegetables, fruit and yogourt, for meals and snacks.
- **Offer a "nibble tray"**. At snack time, fill a muffin tin or ice cube tray with bite-sized portions of colourful, nutritious foods. Try cooked macaroni, cheese cubes, kidney beans, grape halves, broccoli florets, ready-to-eat cereal, and canned pineapple tidbits.
 - **Let children cook**. Your child is more likely to eat what he has helped to make. Children can help wash vegetables, tear up lettuce, scrub potatoes, or stir batter.
 - **Serve new foods over and over again**. A food not eaten at first may soon become a favourite. Simply place a new food on the table with familiar foods. If not eaten, try again another day.
 - **Prepare foods in new ways**. Prepare foods with different tastes, colours, shapes and textures - your child may enjoy foods that you don't!
 - **Eat well yourself**. Eat meals with your child. She will be more likely to try new foods if she sees you eating them.
 - **Ignore "food jags"**. A food jag is when a child will only eat one or a few foods. It is quite common and is usually temporary. Try to offer other foods with the desired food. To ensure variety, serve the desired food at only one meal per day.

How can I get my child to eat more vegetables?

- **Try raw instead of cooked.** Many children prefer raw vegetables that are crunchy and colourful. Slice vegetables and serve with a nutritious dip made from cottage cheese, cream cheese, yogourt, chickpeas, or avocado. Grated raw carrots are a safer choice than carrot sticks or coins for children under the age of four.
- **Add them to favourite foods.** Add grated or diced vegetables to soups, spaghetti sauce, pizza, macaroni and cheese, lasagna, kabobs, and muffins.
- **Plant a garden.** Let your child help care for and harvest the plants at home or at a community garden. He will be more interested in eating vegetables that he has helped to grow or pick. Or visit a pick-your-own farm for locally grown fresh veggies and fruit.
- **Be a role model.** Don't expect your child to eat her Brussels sprouts if you won't eat them yourself! Make vegetables a regular part of meals and snacks.
- **Offer fruit instead.** Serve a variety of colourful fruit to your child if he refuses to eat vegetables. Fruit and vegetables contain similar nutrients.

How can I get my child to eat meat?

- **Offer tender servings of soft meats.** These are easier to chew.
- **Serve small pieces of meat in a broth or sauce.** This will soften the meat.
- **Use ground meat.** Try meatloaf, meatballs, or meat patties.
- **Offer other protein-rich foods** such as eggs, chicken, fish, tofu, beans, peas, lentils, peanut butter and cheese.

My child refuses to drink milk. Should I be concerned?

It is recommended that young children drink 2 cups (500 mL) of milk every day to meet their needs for vitamin D and calcium. If your child does not drink milk, discuss other ways of providing calcium and vitamin D with a dietitian or doctor. For further information on sources of calcium and vitamin D, see the Nutrition Matters titled *Getting the Calcium without the Cow*. Contact Toronto Public Health for a copy.

Does my child need a vitamin-mineral supplement?

If a child is eating a variety of foods from all four food groups in Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating, supplements are rarely needed. A dietitian or doctor can offer advice when a supplement is needed. Be sure to keep supplements out of reach of children to avoid overdose.

The bottom line

There may be days when meal times are challenging. Remember to relax - you are probably doing better than you think. Meals are a time when both you and your child learn about food and each other. As long as your child is growing and developing normally, a relaxed approach is best. Enjoy this special time in your child's life!

Adapted from material produced by Public Health Nutritionists/Dietitians in Ontario, August 2002.

Nutrition Matters Newsletters are produced by Toronto Public Health. For more information, call 416-338-7600. For additional issues, refer to Publications on our website at www.toronto.ca/health

June 2003

PH0303SS045