



Healthy Eating Habits for Your Child

Teaching your child to have healthy eating habits is a part of making sure that they are eating well and getting all of the nutrition that they need to grow. By modeling positive mealtimes, you can help your child to learn how to eat a variety of healthy foods.

Mealtime Routine

Parents decide **WHEN** food is served and **WHAT** food to offer:



- Offer 3 meals and 2 – 3 snacks every day. Space meals and snacks 2-3 hours apart.
- Limit meals to 20 – 30 minutes and snacks to 15 minutes. Do not offer food in between meals and snacks.
- Offer a food from all four food groups at meals and from two food groups at snack time.
- Don't be a short order cook! Only prepare one meal and offer it to the whole family.
- At each meal offer at least one food that your child usually likes. Offer a portion that is appropriate for their age. If your child finishes the preferred food and asks for more, use 'Grandma's Law' to promote trying new or less preferred foods. That is, "First try a bite of [new food], then you can have more [preferred food]."
- Offer your child small portions of new foods without pressure to take a bite or clean their plate". You might need to serve a food 20 times or more before they will try it.
- Allow your toddler to get messy. This is how they explore foods and learn to eat.

Children decide **HOW MUCH** and **WHETHER** to eat:

- Offer small portions of each food on your child's plate. They may get turned off by too much food. You can always offer more if they finish what is on their plate.
- You can try using condiments or sauces to mask the flavour of non-preferred foods.
- If your child chooses to eat little or even nothing, calmly take the food away at the end of the meal or snack. Avoid making a comment about how much they ate. There is always another snack or meal coming up.
- If the family is having dessert, offer your child a child sized portion even if they did not eat their main meal.
- Choose healthier desserts more often such as fruit, yogurt or milk pudding.
- Ask your child to think about whether their tummy feels hungry or if they have had enough.

Positive Mealtimes

- Have fun by letting your child choose healthy foods at the grocery store. Encourage your child to participate during meal preparation (measuring, stirring, setting table, cleaning fruits and vegetables).
- Eating together as a family is very important. Family meals are good times to have fun and model healthy eating.

- Encourage your child to explore new foods by talking about their color, shape, smell and texture.
- Help your child focus on eating by sitting together at a table and avoid distractions (T.V., electronics, toys).
- Make meals pleasant. Ignore minor undesirable behaviour (complaining about the meal, playing with food, fidgeting) and praise your child when they do well. Always offer positive attention.
- Do not force or bribe your child to eat or punish them for not eating. This could lead to more difficulties and cause them to eat less.

Nutrition Tips

- Drinking milk and juice can decrease your child's appetite for food. Limit milk to 2 cups (500 mL) per day and give no more than ½ to ¾ cup of juice per day (125 – 200 mL).
- Offer drinks half way through or at the end of the meal.
- If your child is thirsty between meal and snack time offer them water.
- If you are concerned that your child is not gaining enough weight, try adding some calorie boosters like margarine, mayonnaise, gravies and sauces, vegetable oil, cheese or cream to their foods. Stay away from light or low fat products.
- If your child refuses meats, encourage them to eat other protein rich foods (eggs, nut butters, dried or canned beans or lentils and tofu).
- If you are worried about your child's nutrition or if they refuse a particular food group, offer one children's multi-vitamin with minerals that includes iron daily.



It is always important to remember that in some circumstances, children may still have feeding aversions despite all your efforts. Even with some expert advice, some children's eating habits/aversions may remain unchanged for a long time. It is important not to get discouraged or feel guilty.

Resources:

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References:

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Fraker, C., Fishbein, M., Cox, S., Walbert, L. 2007. Food Chaining: The Proven 6-Step Plan to Stop Picky Eating, Solve Feeding Problems, and Expand Your Child's Diet. Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press.

Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php>

