



# What's to Eat?

## Healthy Foods for Hungry Children

Is your refrigerator stocked with healthy foods? Are any of your children picky eaters? Do you eat out often? Did you know that young children can choke on certain foods?

Read on for information from the American Academy of Pediatrics on creative ways to serve up breakfast and lunch, tips for picky eaters, and how to make healthy fast-food choices. Also, read some tips about food safety, choking hazards, food allergies, and microwave safety. If you have specific questions about your child's nutrition, talk with your child's doctor or a registered dietitian.

### Off to a Good Start...Breakfast

Breakfast gives children energy to carry through an active morning. Children who skip breakfast may not concentrate well at school or may lack energy to play. They also tend to eat unhealthy foods as snacks later.

Cereal with low-fat (1%) milk is a favorite, but sweetened cereal can have a lot of added sugar. Check the Nutrition Facts label before buying. Although the percent daily values on food labels are based on calorie levels for adults, they can still be used to select more nutrient-rich cereals (and other foods). Choose cereals with less than 10 to 12 grams of sugar and at least 3 grams of fiber per serving. If your child prefers a sweet taste, jazz up unsweetened cereal with sliced peaches or bananas, strawberries, or blueberries.

For children who don't like traditional breakfast foods like cereal, eggs, or toast, here are some options:

- **Breakfast shake:** Combine milk, fruit, and ice in a blender. (See Milk Choices.)
- **Frozen banana:** Dip a banana in yogurt; then roll it in crushed cereal. Freeze.
- **Leftovers:** Serve whole-wheat spaghetti or chicken hot or cold.
- **Peanut butter snack:** Spread peanut butter on whole-wheat crackers, a tortilla, apple slices, or jicama slices. (See Safety Check.)

### Fun Lunches

Children who help make their own lunches are more likely to eat them. Here are ideas to make lunches fun!

- Use cookie cutters to cut sandwiches into fun, interesting shapes.
- Decorate lunch bags with colorful stickers.
- Put a new twist on a sandwich favorite. Top peanut butter with raisins, bananas, or apple slices.
- For color and crunch, use a variety of veggies as sandwich toppers: cucumber slices, grated carrots, or zucchini.

### Picky Eaters

Even the most nutritious meal won't do any good if a child won't eat it. Some children are picky eaters. Others eat only certain foods—or refuse food—as a way to assert themselves. Try these ideas to make your family meals pleasant.

- Set a good example by eating well yourself. Ideally, eat at least one meal together as a family every day or try for 3 to 4 times per week.
- If your child refuses one food from a food group, try another from the same group the next time you prepare a meal.
  - Try deep-yellow or orange vegetables instead of green vegetables.
  - Try chicken, turkey, fish, or pork instead of lean beef.
  - Try low-fat flavored milk, cheese, or yogurt instead of low-fat milk.
- Boost the nutritional value of prepared dishes with extra ingredients. Mix grated zucchini and carrots into quick breads, muffins, meatloaf, lasagna, and soups.
- Serve a food your child enjoys along with a food he or she has refused to eat in the past.
- Try serving a food again if it was refused before. It may take many tries before a child likes it.
- Invite children to help with food preparation. It can make eating food more fun.
- Add eye appeal for fun. Cut foods into interesting shapes. Create a smiling face on top of a casserole with cheese, vegetables, or fruit strips.

*Keep in mind, the amount of food and number of servings children need daily from each food group depends on their age and how active they are. Some parents worry because young children seem to eat small amounts of food, especially when compared with adult portions.*

*Don't worry about how little a child eats. A child who is growing well is getting enough to eat. If you are concerned, talk with your child's doctor.*

### Food for Fast Times

Hungry and in a hurry? When it comes to food, families want convenience. It's no surprise that fast-food restaurants are so popular. However, many fast foods have a lot of fat, calories, and salt. Children and adults can eat these foods every once in a while if other food choices are sensible. Here are tips on how to make healthier fast-food choices.

#### Milk Choices

Here are guidelines about what type of milk to give your child.

- **Children younger than 12 months**—Human (breast) milk is best. Give iron-fortified formula if breast milk is not available.
- **Children 12 to 24 months**—Whole milk. Your child's doctor may recommend reduced-fat (2%) or low-fat (1%) milk if your child is obese or overweight, or if there is a family history of high cholesterol or heart disease. Check with your child's doctor or a registered dietitian before switching from whole to reduced-fat milk. (Breastfeeding can continue after 12 months of age as long as is desired by mom and baby.)
- **Children older than 24 months**—Low-fat or nonfat (skim) milk.

## At fast-food restaurants

- **Share.** Split an order of fries with other family members.
- **Choose a food from each food group.** Most fast-food places offer a variety of lower-fat choices, including the salad bar (low-fat dressing), plain baked potatoes (top with veggies or salsa), chili, low-fat milk or frozen yogurt, English muffins, or grilled (non-fried) chicken sandwiches.
- **Substitute.** Drink water, low-fat milk, or 100% unsweetened fruit juice instead of soft drinks. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that juice be limited to 4 ounces per day for children 1 to 3 years of age, 4 to 6 ounces per day for children 4 to 6 years of age, and 8 ounces per day for children 7 to 18 years of age. If dessert is included with a meal, ask if fruit is available instead of a dessert.
- **Balance high-fat with low-fat choices.** Order a small hamburger and the salad bar. Kids often like many foods available on a salad bar like fresh fruit, carrot sticks, and broccoli florets.

## At the supermarket

- **Plan ahead.** It takes less than a minute to fix a sandwich with reduced-fat meat and cheese if you have the ingredients. Check the Nutrition Facts label on packaged meats because many deli meats, such as salami and bologna, are high in fat.
- **Shop for healthier meals.** For grab-and-go meals, try ready-made deli sandwiches (made with reduced-fat deli meats) or roasted chicken served with fresh fruits and vegetables from the salad bar.
- **Shop for healthier snacks.** Fruits, vegetables, whole-wheat pretzels, baked tortilla chips, and baked potato chips are low-fat alternatives, but watch salt content.

## Safety Check

### Food safety

Remember 2 important rules to prevent foodborne illness.

1. Everyone should wash his or her hands well before and after meals.
2. Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. When there's no refrigerator to store a bag lunch, here are ways to keep food safe.
  - Tuck an ice or freezer pack into the lunch bag. Or use an insulated container, such as a thermos, to keep hot foods hot.
  - Add a bottle of frozen water or a box of frozen 100% unsweetened fruit juice.
  - Freeze the sandwich bread and filling—or other freezable foods—the night before.

### Choking hazards

Keep dangerous foods from children until 4 years or older depending on each child's development and maturity. However, round, firm food, such as hot dogs or grapes, can be served if completely chopped into tiny pieces. Peanut butter and other nut butters should be spread thinly. Choking hazards include hot dogs; hard, gooey, or sticky candy; chewing gum; nuts and seeds; whole grapes; raw vegetables, such as

carrot sticks; raw fruit chunks, such as apples; popcorn; chunks of peanut butter or other nut butters; marshmallows; meat sticks/sausages; chunks of meat; and chunks of cheese or string cheese.

### Food allergies

If your child has food allergies or is diagnosed with peanut or tree nut allergies, avoid nuts and any food that contains or is made with nut products. Read food labels carefully. Also, whenever your child is away from you, whether it is at school, a child care center, or camp, there must be a plan to avoid problem foods, recognize and treat a reaction, and get medical care. Meet with staff early to set up an action plan.

### Microwave safely

A microwave can help you cook in a healthful way. Vegetables cooked in a microwave stay nutrient rich. Meat, fish, and poultry dishes can be cooked or reheated with little or no added fat.

Microwaving also can help you cook faster and easier. But it can pose potential hazards—especially when children cook with the microwave. Burns are the most common microwave injury. Children can be burned by

- Removing dishes from the microwave—make sure they use a pot holder.
- Spilling hot foods—keep the oven out of a young child's reach.
- Opening microwave popcorn packages and other containers—show older children how to open the container so steam escapes away from their hands and face.
- Eating food that is cooked unevenly or has hot spots—show older children how to stir food well before tasting it, or let food rest so that heat distributes evenly.
- Remember to only use containers labeled for use in the microwave.

*Safety tip:* If children are too young to read or follow written directions, they are too young to use a microwave without supervision.

### Don't Forget Active Play!

Physical activity, along with proper nutrition, promotes lifelong health. Active play is the best exercise for kids! Parents can join their children and have fun while being active too. Some fun activities for parents and kids to do together include playing on swings, riding tricycles or bicycles, jumping rope, flying a kite, making a snowman, swimming, or dancing. The daily recommendation for exercise for children (adults also) is at least 1 hour per day. This takes commitment from parents, but the rewards are time together and better health.

### For More Information

#### American Academy of Pediatrics

[www.AAP.org](http://www.AAP.org) and [www.HealthyChildren.org](http://www.HealthyChildren.org)

#### Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org) and [www.kidseatright.org](http://www.kidseatright.org)

#### US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service

[www.fns.usda.gov](http://www.fns.usda.gov) (includes information on SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] and WIC [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children] benefits)

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