

Healthy Food Choices: 2-5 Years

The following suggestions for healthy food choices are based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, developed through research by the US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Agriculture. The number of servings and serving sizes are intended for children between 2 and 5 years old. When a range is given for a serving size, the smaller portion is generally appropriate for a 2 or 3 year old, while the larger portion is appropriate for a 4 or 5 year old.

Breads, cereals, rice, and pasta (4-5 or more servings)

Examples of servings:

½ - 1 slice whole-grain bread

½ bagel

½ - ¾ cup unsweetened breakfast cereal

¼ - ½ cup cooked pasta or rice

2-5 whole-grain crackers

Other good choices: cornbread, English muffins, muffins, rice cakes

Vegetables (2 or more servings)

Examples of servings:

¼ - ½ cup cooked vegetables

1/3 - ½ cup raw vegetables

Good choices: asparagus, beets, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, corn, green and red peppers, green beans, kale, peas, potato, pumpkin, squash, sweet potato, tomato, vegetable juices, zucchini

Fruit (2 or more servings)

Examples of servings:

¼ - 1 piece of fruit

¼ - ½ cup cooked fruit

Good choices: apples, applesauce, apricots, bananas, cantaloupe, fruit cocktail, grapefruit, kiwifruit, nectarines, oranges, peaches, plums, strawberries, watermelon

Dairy products (3-4 servings)

Examples of servings:

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup milk

$\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ ounce low-fat cheese

$\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ cup low-fat yogurt

Other good choices: low-fat cottage cheese, custard, ice cream

Meat, fish, poultry, and legumes (2 or 3 servings)

Examples of servings:

1-2 ounces lean meat, fish, poultry, or tofu

1 egg

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup cooked dried beans

1-2 tbsp peanut butter

Other good choices: shellfish, dried peas, lentils, reduced-fat cold cuts

Facts on Fat

Children younger than age 2 need as much as 50% of their daily calories from fat for healthy growth and brain development. After age 2, up to 30% of calories should be derived from fat. Once your child is 2 years old, you can start reducing dietary fat by:

- switching from whole milk to low-fat or nonfat milk
- serving more fish and poultry and cutting back on red meat
- removing the skin from poultry and trimming fat from meats
- reducing butter and margarine use

- using low-fat cooking methods such as baking, broiling, grilling, poaching, and steaming
- serving fiber-rich foods, including whole-grain breads, cereals, dried peas and beans, fruits, and vegetables

Facts on Fiber

Fiber becomes important in your child's diet after age 3. Dietary fiber may play a role in reducing the chances of heart disease and cancer later in life. If you follow the suggestions on fruit and vegetables servings each day, and you make sure to buy only whole-grain breads and cereals, you'll be well on the way toward helping your child develop good eating habits he'll continue through his life.

You can boost fiber by serving fresh salad with your meals, adding oat or wheat bran to any baked goods you make, and offering legumes such as chickpeas, lentils, and kidney beans at least once a week. If you think that your child isn't getting much fiber, be sure to increase his fiber intake gradually, since excessive fiber can cause painful bloating and gas. Don't forget to have kids drink plenty of water each day as well, since liquid intake can help reduce the chances of fiber-related intestinal distress. Be aware that excessive fiber intake can interfere with the body's absorption of crucial vitamins and minerals.

Calcium Counts

Making sure your toddler or preschooler gets enough calcium should be another priority. Sufficient calcium now can mean stronger, healthier bones for your child later. Children ages 1 to 3 require 500 milligrams of calcium each day; from age 4 to age 8, the requirement is 800 milligrams each day. After age 8, the requirement jumps to 1,300 milligrams per day. You can meet these guidelines by offering your children good sources of calcium such as:

- low-fat or nonfat milk
- low-fat or nonfat yogurt
- low-fat cheese
- tofu
- salmon (with bones)
- calcium-fortified fruit juices
- ice cream (occasionally)

Taming the Sweet Tooth

Almost everyone has a sweet tooth, and that attraction to sweets can make it difficult to keep toddlers and preschoolers from choosing candy, cookies, and cakes over healthier fare. You can't do much to take the sweet tooth out of the kid, but you can keep sweets out of your pantry. Children who feast on sugary foods wind up with little appetite for better food choices, so let sweets be a "once-in-a-while" snack. This way you'll help your child develop a taste for other foods.

If, like most kids, your child loves cereals, make sure to buy unsweetened varieties and sweeten them up with slices of fruit or raisins. At some point your child may beg you to buy some high-sugar, low-nutrition cereal. If you give in, "dilute" the sugary cereal with an equal amount of low-sugar, whole-grain cereal. Brush up on ways to sweeten foods without adding processed sugar. Fruit juices, unsweetened applesauce, and prune purees can be used in place of fats and sugars in many recipes.

While you're at it, ditch the caffeine as well. Caffeine doesn't belong in a child's diet. Since it's a stimulant, it can interfere with your child's concentration and ability to sleep well. Avoid soft drinks and iced tea, since these can contain large quantities of caffeine.

Remember to keep snack time healthful. Provide attractive, nutritious alternatives to high-calorie, low-nutrition packaged snack foods. A snack can be a little bit of a leftover meal or half a sandwich. Children love finger foods at snack time, so stock up on:

- bite-sized pieces of cheese or cheese sticks
- cut-up fresh veggies and fruit (beware of choke foods)
- dried fruits, such as raisins, figs, and prunes
- graham crackers and whole-grain crackers
- pretzels
- frozen fruit juice bars

Nutritional Supplements

If your child is eating a variety of healthful foods, he probably doesn't need dietary supplements of any kind.

Iron deficiency caused by nutritional inadequacy is unusual after age 2. However, if your child rarely eats meat, doesn't like iron-fortified cereals of any kind, and stays away from iron-rich vegetables, he may need additional iron and zinc. To boost your child's intake of iron without supplements, first try to get him to eat some of the following foods each week:

- liver
- beef
- dried beans
- dried fruit
- baked potatoes

- oatmeal
- iron-fortified cereals

Do not let your toddler or preschooler drink excessive amounts of milk (more than a quart per day). Too much milk can interfere with the absorption of iron and cause intestinal bleeding.

Some parents choose to give their child supplements. If you do, be sure to check labels for proper doses. If you have concerns or questions about vitamin or iron supplements, check with your doctor. He or she may also recommend a fluoride supplement for your child if you are using a non-fluoridated water supply. Be sure to store supplements well out of your child's reach; excessive amounts of supplements can poison a child.

Food Allergies

How will you know if your child is allergic to a newly introduced food or has developed an allergy to something he's been eating all along? The signs and symptoms of food allergies vary and can range from annoying to life threatening. Here are some symptoms that might indicate a food allergy:

- rashes, hives, and eczema
- respiratory ailments such as sneezing, coughing, a runny nose, and wheezing
- digestion problems, including vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain
- Of course, these symptoms can be caused by problems other than a food allergy.

If your child has any of these symptoms, let your doctor know.

Most childhood food allergies can be traced back to five common foods: milk, eggs, peanuts, wheat, and soy. Shellfish, citrus fruits, and strawberries are also common causes of an allergic reaction. When the

symptoms of food allergies are severe (such as difficulty breathing), your child will most likely need testing to pinpoint the exact problem. When the allergy is confined to a single food, such as peanuts, the offending food can simply be eliminated from a child's diet. If it turns out the child is allergic to all wheat products, or milk or eggs, you'll probably need a registered dietitian's help to plan a diet to meet your child's nutritional needs while avoiding those foods.

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