

Feeding Your Toddler



Toddlers are active, curious, and fun. They may also have picky eating habits that make them challenging eaters. Here are some tips for feeding your toddler.

- **Eat family meals together with the TV off.** Keep mealtime relaxing and fun. Meals together allow you to model healthy eating habits. Let your child see you eating breakfast and enjoying fruits and vegetables.
- **You decide what food to serve,** and where and when to serve meals and snacks. Let your child decide whether or not he is hungry and how much to eat. Don't make your child clean his plate.
- **Encourage your child to eat iron-rich foods** (e.g., meat, fish, poultry) and foods that have vitamin C (e.g., fruits and vegetables), which helps the body absorb iron.
- **Children's appetites naturally go up and down.** When your child is sick or teething he may not eat much. At other times he may eat a lot. The amount of food a child eats varies from day to day.
- **Toddlers will sometimes want to "graze" or snack throughout the day instead of eating meals.** To encourage your toddler to eat at mealtime, it's okay to limit snacks and just serve water an hour or two before a meal.
- **Toddlers need small portions.** A good rule of thumb is to serve 1 tablespoon of a food for each year of age. For example, serve 3 tablespoons of peas for a three-year-old. Let your child ask for more if he wants it.
- **Provide healthy choices for your child.** For example, ask if he wants an apple or a banana as a snack. Limit juice, sweets, chips, and fast food, which are not good for your child and can lead to unhealthy weight gain.
- **Avoid bribing or rewarding with food.** Give hugs and attention as rewards instead.
- **Avoid offering dessert as a reward** for finishing a meal. Rewarding with sweets may teach children to value sweets more than other foods.
- **Avoid foods that could cause choking:** whole nuts, grapes, hot dogs, popcorn, chunks of meat and vegetables, peanut butter and hard, chunky candy.
- **Limit juice, candy, and other foods** that stick to teeth. This helps prevent tooth decay.
- **Toddlers can be messy eaters.** Your child will eat with his hands most of the time, but encourage him to use a child-size spoon and fork too. Minimize the mess by serving small portions, using large bibs, and keeping towels handy. Remember, your child is learning how to eat and needs practice.

Frequently Asked Questions

My toddler is a fussy eater. What should I do?

It is common for toddlers to be picky eaters. Although it is normal, it can be frustrating. Here are some key points to remember:

- Your child is growing more slowly than he did as a baby and may not have as much of an appetite.
- Your child is becoming more independent and may be saying no to many things, including food.
- Your child will learn to like new foods when he sees, smells, and (hopefully) tastes them over and over again. Be patient.
- Feed your toddler like the rest of the family; there is no need to make a special meal. He can eat most of the foods you eat, as long as they are soft and/or cut into small, easy to handle pieces.

What if my toddler won't eat vegetables?

First, keep serving vegetables and showing your child that you eat and enjoy them. Your child may like to dip vegetables rather than eating them plain. Second, remember that fruit has many of the same nutrients vegetables do, so serve a variety prepared in different ways. Beans and peas can also help make up for other vegetables. Many young children enjoy refried beans, hummus, beans and rice, and bean soups.

What if my toddler won't drink milk?

Don't force your child to drink milk. Serve cheese, yogurt, and other foods made with milk, such as pudding, custard, and creamy soups. Add nonfat dry milk powder to yogurt, smoothies, and mashed potatoes. Try serving milk extra cold with ice, in a special cup, or with a special straw.

Food Group	No. of Servings Daily	Serving Size	Healthy Ideas
Grains	4 to 6	$\frac{1}{4}$ slice of bread $\frac{1}{2}$ cup cold cereal $\frac{1}{4}$ cup cooked pasta $\frac{1}{4}$ cup hot cereal $\frac{1}{4}$ cup rice 2 to 3 crackers	Choose whole grains as often as possible. Serve oatmeal, corn tortillas, crackers made from whole wheat, corn, or oats, brown rice, 100% whole wheat bread, and whole grain cereals.
Vegetables	2 to 3	1 to 2 tablespoons or 3 ounces of vegetable juice	Make sure vegetables are cooked soft and cut up so toddlers can chew them. Offer orange vegetables like carrots and cooked squash or yams, as well as green leafy vegetables like broccoli and spinach.
Fruit	2	1 to 2 tablespoons or $\frac{1}{4}$ piece	Offer a variety of fruits including orange fruits such as apricots, mango, and peaches, and citrus fruits like oranges. Fruit juice is not recommended for kids this age. Serve water to a thirsty child instead. If you do give your child juice, limit it to no more than 4 to 6 ounces in a day, served in a cup, not a bottle. Make sure the label says "100% whole fruit juice." Do not give your child soda or other sweet drinks.
Proteins	2 to 3	1 to 2 tablespoons meat, poultry or fish, 3 tablespoons beans, 2 tablespoons peanut butter, 1 egg, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup tofu	Meats can be hard for toddlers to chew, so offer ground meats (meat loaf or meat balls), and cut other meat into small pieces. Serve hard-boiled and scrambled eggs, chopped or mashed beans, bean or pea soup, tofu and hummus. Fish without bones is another good choice.
Dairy	2	8 ounces of milk or soy milk (up to 24 oz. per day), 8 ounces cow or soy yogurt, $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 ounces of cheese	Continue to breastfeed for as long as it works for you and your child. At 12 months, you can also serve your child whole cow's milk or soy milk. After age two, switch to nonfat or low-fat (1%) milk. Always put milk in a cup and wean your child from the bottle between 12 and 18 months. If your child drinks soy milk, make sure it is fortified with calcium and vitamin D.

What are some healthy, portable snacks for toddlers?

Think of snacks as a chance to serve your child nutritious food, not just cookies or crackers. Plan ahead and keep a small cooler or lunchbox full of snacks "to go." Some nutritious choices include:

- fresh fruit like bananas, sliced pears, strawberries, or cups of applesauce or diced peaches
- fresh vegetables like thin zucchini strips, diced cooked carrots, cucumber sticks, red bell pepper slivers, etc.
- cooked small pasta shapes such as shells, bowties, orzo, etc.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your child's physician or other health care professional. If your child has persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your child's doctor.

- half sandwiches on soft, whole grain bread
- cheese with whole grain crackers
- low-fat yogurt
- small containers of whole grain cereals that are low in sugar

Healthy Habits

You can help your child have a healthy weight and strong body now and in the future. Serve a variety of healthy foods and make sure that your child plays actively for an hour every day. Remember that the eating habits your child learns now are the foundation for healthy habits later in life.

Resources

Websites

Kaiser Permanente: kp.org/mydoctor

AAP: healthychildren.org

MyPlate: choosemyplate.gov

Books

Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense by Ellyn Satter

How to Get Your Kid To Eat...but Not Too Much by Ellyn Satter

Nutrition: What Every Parent Needs to Know by American Academy of Pediatrics et al.

Newsletter

Tiny Tummies Food and Nutrition Newsletter for Parents

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