
Pediatrics

Healthy Eating Tips for Children

Nutritional requirements for children are similar to those for adults. While specific nutritional requirements may change with different stages of development, following some general guidelines can help ensure that your child is well-nourished.



Feed Your Child Protein-Rich Foods, Especially at Breakfast

Starting the day with protein and getting enough protein throughout the day helps regulate blood sugar and mood, cognitive function, and attention, as well as reduce anxiety. Ideas for protein-rich breakfasts include:

- Scrambled eggs with sautéed vegetables
- Unsweetened almond butter on toast with a banana
- Plain Greek yogurt with berries and nuts
- Breakfast tacos or burritos made with tofu or beans
- Leftover proteins from dinner (e.g., roasted chicken, fish, meatballs, etc.) with leftover vegetables
- A fruit and vegetable smoothie mixed with protein powder

Get Creative with Fruits and Vegetables

One way to get children to eat more fruit and vegetables is to add them (pureed or finely chopped) to foods like spaghetti sauce, smoothies, burgers, muffins, pasta, and rice. Other ideas include:

- **Make smoothies and fresh juices.** It may be easier to get your child to drink their fruits and vegetables, especially if they get to see the juicing and blending happen before their eyes. Try combinations like carrot and orange or banana and spinach.
- **Let your child play with food.** Exploring different textures and flavors can increase the chances that your child will eat a food.
- **Arrange foods into familiar patterns and fun shapes.** Try cutting food into circles, squares, or hearts, or arrange different fruits and vegetables on the plate to make funny faces, animals, trees, flowers, boats, etc.

Rotate Foods to Prevent Nutrient Deficiencies and Food Sensitivities

A diverse diet helps ensure that your child has access to a wider supply of vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients. That makes nutritional insufficiencies or deficiencies less likely, promotes good health, and helps protect against chronic disease.

A varied diet also helps protect against the development of food sensitivities. Like adults, children tend to crave foods to which they are the most sensitive. Rotating food choices can help prevent those sensitivities from developing.

Tips to encourage eating a variety of foods include:

- **Teach children to “eat the rainbow.”** Create a game of eating one fruit or vegetable from each color of the rainbow every day.
- **Try the “one bite” approach.** Children who initially reject a food are more likely to accept the food after they are exposed to the food 8-10 times. Encouraging children to try at least one mouthful of a food whenever it is served increases the chances that they will become familiar with the food and stop rejecting it down the road.
- **Be a good role model.** Your child will be more likely to eat a food if they see you eating it.

Involve Your Child in Food Preparation

Children are more likely to take an interest in a meal if they help with its preparation. Some ideas for involving children in the cooking process include:

- **Enlist your child’s help in preparing meals and snacks.** Children are more likely to eat something they helped make.
- **Ask your child for input on what to cook.** Allow younger children to pick out one or two foods to help you cook for dinner. Get older children involved by allowing them to choose and prepare (with supervision) one recipe to make for dinner every week.
- **Teach your child where food comes from.** Start a backyard garden and teach children how to plant and harvest foods. Let them plant one food they love so they can watch it grow. The sense of pride they feel about growing their own food makes it more likely that they will show an interest in eating the food later.

Avoid Processed Foods When Possible

It is unrealistic to expect that your child will eat only fresh, whole, organic foods all of the time, both inside and outside the home. Make a plan to save the processed treats for special occasions like friends’ birthday parties, and stock the pantry with unprocessed snacks. Some ideas for snacks are nuts, unsweetened dried fruit, or dehydrated vegetable chips with hummus.