



Food for Kids

The healthy start to eating for pre-primary and primary school children

Things are changing

- When your child starts Kindy and primary school, you will notice plenty of changes, including the foods they want to eat.
- Lots of new things will influence their food choices:
 - learning new skills in preparing and choosing foods at school
 - seeing what other children eat, and trying new foods away from home.
 - TV and social media, and food companies marketing to children, which play a big part in promoting particular foods.
- With your help, you child can learn to make healthy food and lifestyle choices.

The world is beginning to open up for children as they start school.

They learn quickly and there are many influences outside the home.

Physically, children continue to grow steadily.

They need a wide variety of nutritious foods, and plenty of opportunities to be physically active.

Regular meals and a wide variety of different foods ensure that your child has the nutrients they need to grow and develop. Your child's appetite will vary along with their activity, and this influences how much they will eat.

Breakfast is an important meal which helps children to have enough energy and to concentrate in school.

Busy, active children usually need **snacks** at morning recess and after school.

Offer **school lunches** that are appetising, nutritious and easy to eat. Some schools have canteens – your child will probably need some help in choosing a healthy and satisfying lunch.

Family meals are important times for talking and sharing the day's news and activities. Share and enjoy meals together. Avoid distractions – turn off the TV, and put phones, toys and pets away.

Water is the best drink for children. Regularly drinking water throughout the day is important, especially when children are active or the weather is hot.

Healthy food choices for school-aged children

The early school years are a time of rapid learning and steady physical growth. Children need a variety of foods to meet nutrient needs. As body size increases, so does the amount of food needed. When children are very active they have higher energy (kilojoule) needs. Your child's appetite will increase to meet these needs.

Encourage your child to eat when they are hungry, and stop eating when they've had enough.



Recommended serves for children

		2-3 years	4-8 years	9-11 years	12-13 years	14-18 years	What is a serve?
		years	years	years	years	years	
Vegetables and legumes/beans	Boys	2 1/2	4 1/2	5	5 1/2	5 1/2	
	Girls	2 1/2	4 1/2	5	5	5	
Fruit	Boys	1	1 1/2	2	2	2	
	Girls	1	1 1/2	2	2	2	
Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain and/or high cereal fibre varieties	Boys	4	4	5	6	7	
	Girls	4	4	4	5	7	
Lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, legumes/beans	Boys	1	1 1/2	2 1/2	2 1/2	2 1/2	
	Girls	1	1 1/2	2 1/2	2 1/2	2 1/2	
Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or alternatives, mostly reduced fat	Boys	1 1/2	2	2 1/2	3 1/2	3 1/2	
	Girls	1 1/2	1 1/2	3	3 1/2	3 1/2	



What to do if your child...

Won't eat the evening meal

It's not unusual for busy children to eat very little at the evening meal.

- Offer a variety of nutritious after-school snacks such as a slice of toast, cheese and crackers, or milk and fruit.
- Then just offer the family meal evening meal and let your child eat until they are full. Encourage your child to stop eating once they've had enough, even if this means they haven't finished everything on their plate.

Can be picky about eating

It is common for children to eat in picky ways. Encourage your child, but avoid forcing them to eat.

- Just keep offering foods they've refused at other times.
- Some children need to see a new food 10 times or more before they'll accept it.
- Seeing others enjoy the food will help.
- Try offering new foods with other foods you know your child likes.

Asks for treats like lollies, chips and take-away foods

Encourage your child to eat a wide variety of foods from the five food groups most of the time.

- Save treats for special occasions. Many of these foods replace other nutritious foods. They are high in energy (kilojoules), which can lead to overweight if eaten regularly. These foods don't need to be in the lunchbox every day.

Isn't growing as expected

If you're worried that your child is gaining too much – or not enough – weight, speak to your child health nurse or doctor.

- Weight loss diets are not suitable for children unless your child is under the care of a doctor or dietitian.
- Limit the amount of time spent in front of screens and encourage your child to do something active – play games or sports, walk to school if possible, or take the dog for a walk. Try to get the family to join in some of these physical activities every day.



Drinks

Encourage your child to drink plain water.

Limit sweet drinks – cordials, soft drinks and fruit juice.

- These are all high in sugar, and children who have a sugary diet run the risk of tooth decay. The extra kilojoules may also contribute to unhealthy weight.
- Filling up on sweet drinks also takes away the appetite for more nutritious foods.

Artificially sweetened drinks are not suitable for children.

- Fruit juice contains many important vitamins but it lacks the fibre needed to prevent constipation. Offer a piece of fresh fruit instead of fruit juice.

Healthy eating tips for children

1. Give children a variety of foods at all meals and snacks.
2. Snacks are important. Offer nutritious foods like bread, crackers, cheese, yoghurt, fruit.
3. Offer a nutritious breakfast which can be eaten 'on the go' if time is an issue.
4. Try to eat together as a family as often as you can.
5. Pack your child's lunch at home. Involve your child in choosing and preparing it from a range of healthy options.
6. Encourage your child to try new foods and just keep offering things they don't like. Try serving new foods along with foods they like and accept.
7. Let your child tell you when they're full.
8. Encourage children to drink plain water, especially when they are thirsty.
9. Involve children with planning and preparing healthy meals.
10. Plan physical activities for all the family to encourage a healthy balance between food eaten and energy used.



Healthy food your child will love

Frozen fruit, such as grapes, banana, pear or rockmelon, make healthy iced snacks; these, are perfect in hot weather.

Blend fruit, such as strawberries, banana or mango, with milk and a spoonful of low-fat yoghurt to make a delicious fruit smoothie.

Toast bread, muffins or fruit bread. Top with ricotta cheese and slices of banana, and dust lightly with cinnamon.

Cut vegies into bite-sized pieces and serve in a small container so that children can help themselves. Try serving vegies raw or lightly cooked, as in a stir-fry.

Add chopped tomato and green capsicum to a can of baked beans. Use as a 'topper' on toast or muffins, or a 'filler' for baked potatoes or toasted sandwiches. Sprinkle with a little grated low-fat cheese.

Scrambled vegetables make a great breakfast or tasty snack. Simply add cooked vegetables – leftovers are fine – to lightly beaten eggs. Cook gently over low heat until the eggs are firm. Season with pepper and serve on toast.

Keep school lunches cool, fresh and safe to eat by using a cool bag or placing a bottle of frozen water in the lunch box. For variety, include salads, wraps using pita bread or tortillas, and dips with bread/crackers and cut up vegies. Try to eat meals together as a family.

When to get help

Contact your child health nurse or doctor if:

- you are worried about your child's growth
- your child is unwell, tired and not eating
- mealtimes are causing a lot of family stress and anxiety.



Need more information or help?

- Child health nurse
- your doctor
- Dietitians Association of Australia
Find a local Accredited Practising Dietitian at daa.asn.au
- Eat for health
(EatForHealth.gov.au)
- Raising Children Network
(raisingchildren.net.au)

This publication is provided for general education and information purposes. Contact a qualified healthcare professional for any medical advice needed.

Based on CAH-003167 Food for Kids

Produced by Child and Adolescent Health Service – Community Health ©State of Western Australia 2024

