

Healthy Diet

Parents have a lot of questions about what their kids should eat. A healthy diet helps keep your child healthy now and builds good habits for the future. The goal is to provide high-quality nutrition while avoiding excess calories, which could lead to obesity. Your doctor will monitor your child's growth and nutrition at each office visit. Be sure to ask the doctor if you have any questions about this important issue.

What's a healthy diet for my child?

Children of all ages need a balanced diet, including all the different food groups: grains, vegetables, fruits, dairy products, and meats/proteins. Fats and sweets should be limited. As your child grows, the number of servings of each food will gradually increase.

No diet is perfect for every child. The best diet is one that provides a good variety of foods, with enough calories to support your child's growth and energy needs. A diet that provides too many calories, and especially too many fats and sweets, puts your child at risk of becoming overweight or obese. Providing a healthy diet in childhood will build good eating habits that will last throughout your child's life.

What foods are included in a healthy diet?

For children (and adults), a healthy diet includes a good variety of foods from the following groups:

- **Grains**, such as bread, cereals, and pasta. Whole grains are best: whole-wheat bread is better than white bread, and oatmeal is better than boxed cereals.
- **Vegetables**. Give a good mix of dark-green vegetables, like spinach or broccoli, and orange/yellow vegetables, like carrots.
- **Fruits**, such as apples, bananas, oranges, raisins. Give lots of fresh fruit, not just fruit juices. Many fruit juices have added sugar, resulting in unnecessary calories.
- **Milk**. Milk and other dairy foods (such as yogurt and cheese) provide calcium for growing bones. In children under 2, too much milk (more than 20 to 24 ounces per day) increases the risk of iron deficiency anemia.
- **Meats**. Lean meats (not too much fat) are best. This category also includes eggs, fish, beans, and tofu.
- **Fats and sweets**. Limit the amounts of these foods.

How much should my child eat?

How much your child eats depends on several factors, including age, sex, and activity level. Of course, bigger kids need to eat more. More active children and teens may also need more food because they are using extra calories through physical activity.

Although your child's diet may vary, there are some general recommendations for daily servings from each food group. The lower amounts are for boys and girls ages 2 to 3; the higher amounts are for teenage boys ages 14 to 18:

- Grains: 4 to 6 ounces per day
- Vegetables: 1 to 3 cups per day
- Fruits: 1 to 2 cups per day
- Milk: 2 to 3 cups per day
- Lean meats (or fish or beans): 2 to 6 ounces per day

For all ages, limit added fats and sweets. We tend to get enough fat and sugar in the other foods we eat, without putting a lot of butter on bread, sugar on cereal, etc.

What foods should I avoid? "Junk foods" are major contributors to overweight and obesity in American children. Cut back on snack foods like chips, cookies, candy. Avoid "fast foods" and prepackaged foods. For example, serve baked potatoes rather than French fries. For dessert, serve fresh fruit rather than sweets. For many children and teens (and parents), cutting back on or eliminating soft drinks (soda pop) can save a lot of calories.

What does a serving look like?

This is an important question; people often overestimate the amount of food that makes up one serving. Examples of appropriate serving sizes are:

- Grains: 1 slice of bread or tortilla, ½ cup of cooked oatmeal or rice
- Vegetables: 1 cup of dark green lettuce, 1½ carrots
- Fruits: 1 medium apple, orange, or banana, ½ cup of cut-up fruit
- Milk: 1 cup of milk or yogurt, 1½ ounces of cheese
- Meats/proteins: 2 ounces of meat, 1 egg, 2 tablespoons of peanut butter

What about exercise?

The latest healthy diet recommendations emphasize the importance of regular physical activity and exercise. Even the healthy diet recommended above may provide more

calories per day than your child uses in energy if he or she is not physically active.

- Try to provide opportunities for your child for at least 30 minutes of physical activity every day. Build some exercise into your child's (and family's) everyday routines. For example, your child can walk to school rather than being driven.
- Exercise doesn't necessarily mean a formal exercise program or going out for team sports. For younger kids, just getting outside and playing with friends is great exercise. A daily exercise video is a good idea, and something parents can do along with kids.
- Limit your child's "screen time"—TV and video games—to 1 or at most 2 hours per day. Don't let your child have a TV in his or her bedroom.

What if my child isn't following a healthy diet?

Don't worry too much if your child's diet doesn't follow the recommendations exactly. Every child is different in food likes and dislikes, activity level, and metabolism; no diet is right for every child. Your child is probably getting adequate nutrition if he or she has enough energy for daily activities, is growing normally without being overweight, and has some variety in his or her diet. Ask the doctor if you have questions about your child's diet. If your child is not eating any foods from one of the major groups, or is

on a restricted diet for some reason, vitamins or iron supplements may be recommended.

Picky eater. After the first year, toddlers are no longer growing quite so fast. Periods of lack of interest in eating are normal. Children learn by example: good eating habits by the parents are important in producing good habits in children.

When should I call your office?

The doctor will check your child's weight, growth, and nutrition at every office visit. Between visits, call our office if:

- You have questions or concerns regarding your child's diet and nutrition.
- Your child seems to be gaining (obesity/overweight) too much or too little weight.

Where can I get more information?

- The American Heart Association offers a lot of helpful information on a healthy diet and lifestyle. On the Internet at www.americanheart.org, or call 1-800-AHA-USA-1 (1-800-242-8721).
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture offers useful information and publications on current dietary recommendations, including recently updated "Food Pyramids" for children and adults. On the Internet at www.mypyramid.gov, or call 1-888-7PYRAMID (1-888-779-7264).