

Feeding your toddler

12 months to 3 years (36 months)

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This booklet is part of the *Healthy Beginnings* series from York Region Community and Health Services.





When it comes to feeding, the toddler years are an exciting time. Your child is graduating from baby food to table food!

Your toddler can now eat the same meals as the rest of the family. You can help your toddler to safely explore foods from the family table and develop healthy eating skills.

What's typical for toddlers?

- Toddlers can eat small pieces of food with their fingers, hold a spoon and drink from a cup. Provide your toddler with eating utensils that have short, broad, solid handles and forks that have blunt tines
- After the first 12 to 18 months, toddlers' growth slows down so they may eat less than they did before
- Toddlers are curious and want to make their own choices. Toddlers need to test limits as a part of their normal emotional development
- Many toddlers dislike trying new foods
- Toddlers may ask for the same food day after day. "Food jags" like these are common and won't last long, especially if you don't make a fuss about them
- Toddlers want to learn to eat by themselves
- Toddlers are messy eaters. As toddlers feed themselves with their fingers or utensils, they are learning about the taste, smell and feel of foods. Some food will make it into their mouth, but more food will end up on the floor, their clothes, face and hair. Expect a mess and try to relax

Tips to make clean up at the end of the meal easier...

- Put a bib that has an open pocket on your toddler
- Lay a plastic sheet under the high chair or booster seat, or invest in a cordless vacuum cleaner

Let your child control their eating

It is important for toddlers to learn to feel and respond to their body's feelings of hunger and fullness.



The development of healthy eating habits is both the parent's and the child's responsibility. It's the parent's job to offer a variety of nutritious foods at scheduled times. It's the child's job to decide how much they will eat and even whether or not they will eat any of the food choices you offer.

Your job is to decide

- What foods to offer
- When to offer meals and snacks
- Where the child will eat

Your child's job is to decide

- Whether or not they will eat
- How much they will eat

Coaxing or tricking your child to eat can lead to power struggles and an unpleasant mealtime experience.

It isn't easy to let your child decide whether to eat or how much to eat, but it will help your child to learn what hunger feels like and to learn when they are full. If you try to control how much food your child eats, you may cause them to lose touch with their natural appetite control system. This can lead to weight problems and eating when not hungry or to comfort emotions.

Refusing food is often a way for toddlers to show their independence. Remember that healthy children will not starve themselves. When they are hungry, they will eat.

Your child might eat a lot and that's okay. It's best not to cut back on the amount of food that you offer. Toddlers will stop eating when they feel full.

Mealtime as family time

Sit down and eat with your toddler. Make mealtime a time to enjoy your food together. When mealtime is pleasant, toddlers tend to accept a wide variety of foods.

Prepare one meal for the whole family. Always have a nutritious food on the table that you know your child likes. That way your child can find something nutritious that they will eat. Your child may not eat everything, but that's okay.

Give your toddler enough time to finish their meals and snacks. Your child will tell you that they have had enough to eat

by saying "no" or by turning their face away from the food, playing with it, or throwing it on the floor. Remove the food and let your child leave the table when they lose interest in eating. Keeping them at the table will not make them eat more.

Remember, your child learns by watching you. Set a good example by eating a variety of foods yourself.

When dining out...

You don't need to order "kids' meals" for your toddler at restaurants. Just order a meal from the menu to share. Bring some crackers, fruit and milk from home.

How much food does a toddler need?

Toddlers need three meals and two to three snacks each day. Offer a variety of nutritious foods, including some choices that contain fat such as cheese and homo (3.25% M.F.) milk.

Offer your toddler a meal or a snack every two to three hours. Meals should contain foods from three or four food groups in Canada's Food Guide. Snacks between meals should contain at least two food groups. If your child needs a bedtime snack, offer foods from one or two food groups. See "Food guide for toddlers" 12-24 months and 24-36 months on page 5 for toddler serving sizes.

Offer one or two tablespoons of each food and let your child ask for more. Allow them to eat as much or as little as they want at meal and snack times. Then wait until the next scheduled meal or snack

before offering food or beverages other than water.

Include a small amount of unsaturated fat, such as canola, olive, and soybean oil, soft margarine and mayonnaise, each day. For example, use canola oil in stir-fries or put a small amount of margarine or mayonnaise in sandwiches.

How much milk to drink?

A toddler needs two cups (500 mL) of milk every day because it is their main source of vitamin D. Your toddler should



have no more than three cups (750 mL) of milk in a day. If children drink a lot of milk, it will fill them up so they won't be hungry for other foods. This can lead to iron deficiency anemia.

Give homo (3.25% M.F.) milk to toddlers 12 to 24 months. At 24 months, switch to low fat milk such as 1% or 2%.

Fortified soy beverage can be used as an alternative to milk after 24 months. Soy beverages are not appropriate alternatives for toddlers under 24 months as these beverages may not have enough fat needed by children under two.

If your child is breastfeeding...

Breastmilk can continue to supply nutrients during the toddler years. You can offer your child drinks by cup in addition to breastfeeding. If your toddler's main source of milk is breastmilk, they may need a vitamin D

supplement. Ask your toddler's doctor or a dietitian.

What about juice?

If your toddler is drinking a lot of juice, they will fill up on liquids and may not be hungry for other foods. Too much juice may also cause tooth decay, weight problems, diarrhea or stomach upset.

If you offer juice, use 100% fruit juice, and offer no more than 6 ounces (175 mL) a day. Fruit-favoured drinks and pop are not appropriate because they are mostly sugar and water, and very little nutrition.

Prevent tooth decay...

- Serve juice in a cup, not in a baby bottle
- Clean your child's teeth daily with a small, soft toothbrush
- Have your child's teeth checked regularly by a dentist or dental hygienist

Planning healthy snacks

Snacks should be a nutritious, planned part of your toddler's diet. Offer snacks at least two hours before the next meal so your child will be hungry for the meal.

Serve foods such as fruit, crackers, milk and water at snack time. If you want to offer foods such as candy, cookies and chips, keep them as occasional choices. These foods do not have much nutritional value.

Children need healthy limits set by their parents. Sometimes it is necessary to say a firm, but gentle, "No," and stick to it.

Food guide for toddlers - 12 to 24 months

Offer a variety of foods from each food group in Canada's Food Guide to your toddler each day. There is no recommended number of servings for each food group for toddlers under 2 years. However, you can use the following chart as a guide on how much to offer. Let your toddler decide how much to eat.

Food group	Suggested serving sizes for toddlers 12 to 24 months old
Vegetables and Fruit Offer at least one dark green and one orange vegetable or certain types of orange fruit each day.	¼-½ medium vegetable or fruit 15-60 mL (1-4 Tbsp) cooked vegetables or fruit, or grated or chopped raw vegetables or fruit 30-60 mL (2 Tbsp-¼ cup) (1-2 oz) 100% juice
Grain Products Offer whole grain products each day.	¼-½ slice bread ⅙-¼ bagel, pita or tortilla 5-15 g cold cereal 30-100 mL (2 Tbsp-½ cup) cooked cereal 15-60 mL (1-4 Tbsp) cooked pasta, rice, bulgur or couscous
Milk and Alternatives Offer 500 mL (2 cups) (16 oz) of milk each day.	60-125 mL (¼-½ cup) (2-4 oz) homo (3.25% M.F.) milk 15-25 g (½-1 oz) cheese 30-100 g (2 Tbsp-½ cup) yogurt
Meat and Alternatives Offer beans, lentils and tofu often. Offer fish at least two times a week. For information on mercury and fish, contact <i>Health Connection</i> .	10-35 g (¼ -1¼ oz) (1-4 Tbsp) cooked fish, poultry or lean meat 15-100 mL (1 Tbsp-½ cup) tofu or cooked beans or lentils ¼-1 egg 5-15 mL (1 tsp-1 Tbsp) peanut butter

Food guide for toddlers - 24 to 36 months

Children 2 years and older can get the nutrients and calories they need by eating the recommended number of servings from each of the four food groups. This chart shows Canada's Food Guide serving sizes along with the number of servings recommended for 2 to 3 year olds. Food Guide Servings can be divided up into smaller amounts of food offered throughout the day.

Food group	Canada's Food Guide Serving size	# Servings /day
Vegetables and Fruit Offer at least one dark green and one orange vegetable or certain types of orange fruit each day.	1 medium vegetable or fruit 125 mL (½ cup) vegetables or fruit 125 mL (½ cup) 100% juice	4
Grain Products Offer whole grain products each day.	1 slice bread ½ bagel, pita or tortilla 30 g cold cereal; 175 mL (¾ cup) cooked cereal 125 mL (½ cup) cooked pasta, rice, or couscous	3
Milk and Alternatives Offer 500 mL (2 cups) (16 oz) of milk each day.	250 mL (1 cup) milk 50 g (1½ oz) cheese 175 g (¾ cup) yogurt	2
Meat and Alternatives Offer beans, lentils and tofu often. Offer fish at least two times a week. For information on mercury and fish, contact <i>Health Connection</i> .	75 g (2½ oz) cooked fish, poultry or lean meat 175 mL (¾ cup) tofu or cooked beans or lentils 2 eggs 30 mL (2 Tbsp) peanut butter	1

You can evaluate your toddler’s menu using this checklist.

Does the daily menu include...?	Yes	No
Three meals and two to three snacks at scheduled, consistent times?		
A variety of foods from each of the four food groups in Canada’s Food Guide?		
Meals that offer foods from three or four food groups?		
Between meal snacks that offer foods from at least two food groups?		
At least one dark green vegetable (e.g., broccoli, green peas, spinach, bok choy), and at least one orange vegetable or certain types of orange fruit (e.g., carrots, squash, sweet potatoes, apricots, cantaloupe, mango, papaya)?		
Whole grain products such as whole grain breads, cereals and pastas?		
500 mL (2 cups) of milk?		
Fish, poultry, lean meat or meat alternatives such as lentils, beans and tofu?		
Serving sizes that are appropriate for toddlers?		
Foods that are generally soft, moist and easy to chew?		
Foods that you and your family enjoy?		

Learning to like new foods



Your toddler may not like a new food the first few times it is offered. Continue to serve the food even if it has been

rejected. The more often toddlers taste a new food, the more they begin to like it. Toddlers might need to try a new food at 10 or 15 different times before they will like the food. Offer very small portions of a new food along with a food that your child likes.

Don’t pressure your toddler to eat a new food. Studies have shown that if toddlers are pressured to eat, they will eat less well, not better. A healthy relationship with food is more important than eating their peas today. Toddlers will eventually eat a variety of foods if they see the people in their lives eating them.

Choking hazards

Foods that are hard, small and round, smooth or sticky, hard to chew, or do not easily dissolve in the mouth, can cause a small child to choke. For information on choking hazards, contact *Health Connection* at 1-800-361-5653 for a copy of *Choking prevention tips for parents*.

Tips for eating with a toddler

- Encourage them to feed themselves
- Role model and acknowledge desirable behaviour at the table
- Try ignoring minor behavioural issues at the table
- Offer some help with the spoon and fork
- Encourage your child to try new foods by offering new foods often, when they are hungry and happy
- Offer less food than you think they will eat and let them ask for more
- Accept messiness
- Keep mealtime calm and friendly
- 20-30 minutes is enough time for a toddler to eat. Let your child leave the table when they are finished
- Schedule two to three hours between meals and snacks for your toddler to become hungry
- Make mealtime a pleasant family time

Sample menu for toddlers

To help you plan your menus, here is a sample menu of meals and snacks for a week.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Breakfast	Oatmeal Canned peaches Milk	Pancake Grated apple Milk	O-shaped oat cereal Grapes cut in quarters Milk	Scrambled egg Whole grain toast with margarine Milk	Cream of wheat Mango Milk	Grilled cheese sandwich Banana Milk	Whole grain waffle Yogurt Canned pears Milk
Morning snack	Toast with Margarine Hard cooked egg Water	Graham crackers Orange juice	Whole grain bread sticks Strawberries Water	Whole grain banana bread Grape juice	Yogurt Apple juice	O-shaped oat cereal Cherries cut in quarters Water	Whole grain crackers Orange juice
Lunch	Cheese cubes Bread with margarine Green peas Applesauce Milk	Macaroni and cheese Ham slice or other deli meat Cooked okra Milk	French toast with syrup for dipping Cantaloupe Milk	Baked beans Perogies Cooked rapini Margarine Mango Water	Penne pasta with tomato sauce and meatballs Zucchini Banana Milk	Light tuna sandwich with mayonnaise Corn Apricot Milk	Vegetable soup Scrambled egg Bagel with margarine Peach slices Milk
Afternoon snack	O-shaped oat cereal Avocado slices Water	Matzo cracker Plum slices Water	Whole grain mini muffin with margarine Orange juice	Smoothie (banana, yogurt, milk) Graham crackers	Steamed bun Applesauce Water	Whole grain pita Hummus Apple juice	Zucchini bread Cantaloupe Water
Supper	Chicken Rice Cooked cauliflower Margarine Kiwi slices Milk	Baked salmon Brown rice Sweet potato Margarine Tangerine Milk	Meat loaf Mashed potatoes with margarine Green beans Roll or roti Milk pudding Milk	Pork chop Bok choy Roll Fruit salad Milk	Lentils or dhal Rice Cooked carrots Margarine Bran muffin Milk	Stir-fry chicken and broccoli Whole grain noodles Yogurt Milk	Chili Whole grain tortilla Cooked asparagus Apple crisp Milk
Snack	Milk	Milk	Milk	Milk	Milk	Milk	Milk

Please note that this is an “ideal” menu and contains more variety than most parents would offer. It is okay to offer your child leftovers from supper the night before or foods you made on another day in the same week.

Encouraging physical activity

Here are some ideas for fitting physical activity into your toddler's life.



- Encourage active, spur-of-the-moment play, such as jumping
- Play together. For example, play hide and seek, kick a ball or dance with your child
- Limit the time your child watches TV or videos to one hour a day
- Set a good example. Active parents will have active kids

What about vitamin supplements?

After 12 months of age, toddlers should be eating a variety of foods from each of the four food groups in Canada's Food Guide. If a child is eating according to the Food Guide, is growing well, and is healthy, vitamin-mineral supplements are not usually necessary. Teach your child that good nutrition comes from food, not from supplements.

If your child has food allergies or intolerances, or refuses to eat foods from an entire food group, discuss the need for a supplement with your child's doctor or a dietitian.

Vitamin D supplements may be needed for toddlers who do not drink two cups (500 mL) of vitamin D-fortified milk or if their main source of milk is breastmilk. Ask your child's doctor or a dietitian.

Like all medications, supplements should be kept out of reach. Children can be poisoned by an overdose of the nutrients in supplements.

Books and web sites

Better Baby Food. Daina Kalnins, Joanne Saab. Robert Rose Inc., 2001.

Better Food for Kids. Joanne Saab, Daina Kalnins. Robert Rose Inc., 2002.

Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense. Ellyn Satter. Bull Publishing, 2000.

Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family: Orchestrating and Enjoying the Family Meal. Ellyn Satter. Kelcy Press, 2008.

Canadian Paediatric Society
www.caringforkids.cps.ca

Healthy Start for Life www.dietitians.ca/healthystart/content/resources/index.asp

York Region Community and Health Services, Nutrition Services www.york.ca/nutrition

A final note

Toddlers love to explore their world. Give your toddler the freedom to explore food and eating. Be clear about what behaviours are acceptable at mealtime. Make eating a social and enjoyable time and you will set the stage for great eating habits in the years to come.