

# Healthy Beginnings



## Healthy eating for your child (one to five years)



- Set a good example by sitting down and eating together whenever possible
- Enjoy pleasant conversation at mealtime
- Not worry about what and how much your child is eating

Trust your child to choose:

- Whether to eat
- What to eat from what you have offered
- How much to eat

### Meal and snack routines

Your child needs to eat five to six times a day. Set a meal and snack routine that includes three meals and two or three snacks. Eating every two and a half to three hours each day gives your child time to feel hungry and be interested in eating.

Have your child sit in a highchair or booster seat when they eat until they are big enough to sit on a chair. Sitting securely in an upright position at the table is the safest place for children to eat. Letting your child eat in the car or stroller is not safe. Avoid distractions like TV, mobile devices and toys. These distractions will not help your child to eat better and can cause meals to take too long.

Your child will likely take about 15 to 20 minutes to eat. Limit the amount of time for meals and snacks to about 30 minutes to ensure there is enough time between meals and snacks for activities like reading, napping and playing.

Once a meal or snack is over, do not offer food or drinks in-between, except water. If your child knows they can eat and drink any time they want,

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### Learning healthy eating habits

You and your child have different roles when it comes to food and eating. Allowing your child to do their part will help prevent feeding difficulties.

Your role is to:

- Set a regular meal and snack routine
- Avoid frequent snacking throughout the day
- Offer a variety of nutritious foods that your child can feed themselves



there is not much motivation for them to eat when it is meal or snack time.

### Nutritious foods for your child

By your child's first birthday, they are eating a variety of family foods. Choose foods that they can eat independently. If you offer foods they need help with eating, like soup or yogurt, offer another food your child can eat by themselves, like pieces of chicken, vegetables or fruit.

Prepare the same food for everyone in your family. No special foods are needed. Your child can eat and enjoy the same foods as the rest of the family.

Offer a variety of foods from the four food groups in [Canada's Food Guide](#). Include foods that contain sources of fat, such as milk, cheese, avocado and nut butters.

When planning what to offer, choose from at least three food groups for meals and at least two food groups for snacks.

The food groups are:

- Vegetables and Fruit
- Grain Products
- Milk and Alternatives
- Meat and Alternatives

### Iron foods are important

Iron-rich foods are important for your growing child. If iron levels become low, your child will be at higher risk for poor appetite, irritability, and slow growth and development. Low iron can also lead to iron deficiency and anemia which can cause poor brain development. If you are concerned about iron deficiency, talk to your child's health care provider.

To help meet your child's iron needs, offer meat (e.g., beef, dark-meat chicken, fish) or meat alternatives (e.g., beans, lentils, tofu), two to three times each day.

Rice is not a source of iron. Even if a traditional rice-based dish like congee includes a small amount of meat or fish in the recipe, it does not give your

child enough iron. Offer additional meat or meat alternatives with that meal.

### How much to offer

Your child's stomach is small so they may not eat much at one time. The table on page 7 shows suggested amounts to offer based on your child's age. If they are still hungry when they are done, offer more.

### Healthy meals

Offer your child the same foods as the rest of the family. For each meal, offer foods from three or four food groups. Try and make meals look appealing with a variety of colours, tastes and textures such as smooth, soft, diced and grated. That way, your child will be more interested in eating.

Breakfast ideas:

- Scrambled egg, whole-grain toast, milk
- Whole-grain cereal, milk, banana
- Bran muffin, cheese cubes, strawberries, breastmilk

Lunch and supper ideas:

- Fish, congee, bok choy, blueberries, milk
- Dahl or lentils, rice or pasta, carrots, breastmilk
- Meatballs, pasta, tomato sauce, cantaloupe, milk

### Healthy snacks

Snacks are important and should be a nutritious, planned part of your child's diet. Include a fruit or vegetable at most snacks as well as a food from one or two of the other food groups. If you want to offer foods such as candy, cookies and chips, keep them as occasional choices and offer them along with foods from the four food groups. Offer snacks at least two and a half hours before the next meal so your child will be hungry.



Healthy snacks ideas:

- Banana slices, yogurt, water
- Carrot (grated or thin sticks), peanut butter, whole grain crackers, milk
- Mango, zucchini bread, breastmilk

## Drinks for your child

### Milk

If your child is breastfeeding, continue to breastfeed as long as you and your child want. While they are breastfeeding or receiving breastmilk and are less than two years of age, continue to give a daily vitamin D supplement of 400 International Units. See our [Vitamin D for babies and young children](#) factsheet for more information.

If your child's main milk source is not breastmilk, offer pasteurized cow's milk. Offer milk that has 3.25 percent milk-fat (M.F.) until your child is 24 months old to help with growth and development. At 24 months, you can switch to low-fat milk such as skim, one per cent or two per cent M.F. Choose unsweetened milk instead of sweetened milk (e.g., chocolate milk). There is no need to buy special toddler milk.

Full-fat goat's milk, fortified with vitamin D and folic acid, can be an alternative to cow's milk; however, if your child is allergic to cow's milk, they may also be allergic to goat's milk.

### Vegetarian beverages

After 24 months, fortified, full-fat version soy beverage can be used as an alternative to milk. Avoid flavoured soy beverages because they have added sugar that your child does not need.

Soy beverage is not recommended if your child is under 24 months of age as their main milk source. If you need to offer a soy-based product, soy-based infant formula can be given to your child as an alternative to milk.

Coconut milk as well as fortified rice, nut (e.g., almond) or other vegetarian beverages are not recommended as a main milk source. The amount

of protein, energy and fat in these products are not suited for your child's growth needs.

### How much milk to drink

Your child only needs two cups of milk (or soy beverage) each day if they are no longer breastfeeding. At this stage, most of their nutrition is coming from food, not milk. If milk is offered in a bottle or sippy cup, they may want to drink milk instead of eating food. Too much milk (three cups – 750 millilitres or more), can fill children up so they won't be hungry for other healthy foods and can put them at higher risk for low iron. Try offering small servings (e.g., half a cup – 125 millilitres) in an open cup with meals and snacks. Offer water if they finish their milk and are still thirsty.

### Juice

It is better to offer whole fruit instead of juice, since juice does not have the fibre that is in whole fruit. Drinking juice can also lower your child's appetite and lead to tooth decay, especially if you allow your child to sip on it between meals and snacks. Too much juice can also cause diarrhea. It is best to limit or avoid juices and sweetened beverages such as fruit drinks and punches.

If you decide to give juice, choose only 100 percent fruit or vegetable juice and offer no more than half to three quarters of a cup (125 to 175 millilitres) each day at meal or snack time, in an open cup. There is no benefit to diluting juice or buying special toddler juice.

### Water

Offer plain water throughout the day. Water is a great choice to help your child meet their fluid needs without affecting their appetite.



## Other beverages

Avoid beverages like pop, sports drinks, energy drinks, iced tea or lemonade, because they are mainly sugar and water. They can also interfere with your child's interest in foods and beverages from the four food groups and can put you child at higher risk of becoming overweight.

Beverages like coffee, tea, hot chocolate, pop, sports drinks and energy drinks may also have caffeine or caffeine-related ingredients that act as a stimulant affecting your child's behaviour and sleep. Other beverages such as diet pop and some fruit drinks have artificial sweeteners that can be unsafe. Avoid offering any of these beverages.



## Use an open cup

Offering drinks in an open cup helps with your child's development and can prevent them from drinking too much milk and juice. If you are just starting to offer an open cup, your child will need help at first but will get better. Try offering an open cup at every meal or snack.

Training cups (or sippy cups) are popular but they do not support the development of mature drinking skills. If you do offer liquids in a training cup, offer some liquids by open cup each day.

Using a baby bottle past 18 months may result in your child drinking too much which can put them at a higher risk of becoming overweight and [developing tooth decay](#).

## Is your child eating enough?

Your child knows how to control their food intake based on their bodies' hunger and fullness signals. Things like their activity level or illness can have a big impact on how much and what they eat. It is important to respect your child's needs and trust that they know how much to eat.

Once the food is on the table, relax and trust your child to eat how much their body needs. This means that they decide which foods to eat as well as how much to eat, including whether or not to eat at all. Offer small portions with the opportunity for them to ask for more.

Your child's appetite may change from day to day and from meal to meal. Sometimes they will eat a lot, sometimes only a little, and sometimes nothing at all. This is all normal.

Here are some reasons that affect how much your child will want to eat:

**Growth:** They eat more during growth spurts and less when they are not growing quickly.

**Physical activity:** Running and playing can work up an appetite.

**Drinking lots of fluids:** They may be filling up on milk or juice and may not be interested in eating.

**Distractions:** They may not be interested in eating if they are busy playing with toys or watching TV. Also, eating in front of the TV can sometimes lead to overeating as fullness cues may go unnoticed.

**How they are feeling:** They may not be interested in eating when they are tired, upset or sick.



You can tell if your child is no longer interested in eating if they begin to eat more slowly, throw their food, are more interested in getting out of the chair, or are looking at other things around the room. Keeping them at the table longer will not get them to eat more and can lead to more feeding problems.

Any form of pressure to eat, including positive and negative pressure, will not help your child's eating habits. In fact it may make them less willing to eat or prevent them from understanding when they are hungry or full.

Examples of negative pressure to avoid:

- Prodding – “Try just one bite”
- Scolding or shaming – “You are wasting food” or “Why don't you ever finish your food like your brother does?”
- Punishment or withholding treats or fun activities – “Since you didn't eat that, we can't go outside and play”
- Pleading – “Oh, please just finish it”

Examples of positive pressure to avoid:

- Praising – “Good, you ate everything!”
- Applauding - “Yeah, you tried it!”
- Bribing – “If you try this, we will go to the park”
- Talking about nutrition – “If you eat this, you will grow and be strong”
- Serving foods that you especially want them to eat first - “Eat this first, then I will get you the rest of dinner”
- Reminding – “Don't forget to eat your meat”

Any kind of pressure does not work. If you are doing anything special to get your child to eat more, less or eat different foods, you may be pressuring your child.

Don't restrict certain foods or push low-fat foods because you are concerned about your child overeating.

Saying things like: “Are you sure you really want to eat that?” or, “I think you've eaten enough of that” can actually increase how much of these foods your child eats. If you always let your child decide how much to eat, they will eat the amount that's right for them.

### Nutri-eSTEP (nutrition questionnaire)

If your child is between 18 months and five years, you can use the Nutri-eSTEP questionnaire to find out if your child is a healthy eater. Just answer 17 short questions about your child's eating and physical activity. It takes less than ten minutes! You will get feedback on what is going well for you and your child and tips on how to improve eating and activity habits. Visit [www.nutritionscreen.ca](http://www.nutritionscreen.ca)

### Food allergies

Good news! New research shows that children can eat and enjoy all foods, including peanut or nut products, fish and wheat, starting at six months of age. Some foods are more likely to cause an allergy. In Canada, the common food allergens are peanuts, tree nuts (almonds, Brazil nuts, cashews, hazelnuts, macadamia nuts, pecans, pine nuts, pistachio nuts and walnuts), sesame seeds, milk, eggs, seafood (fish, crustaceans and shellfish), soy, wheat, sulphites (a food additive) and mustard. Just wait two days between offering these foods to watch for a reaction. If there is no allergic reaction, continue to offer these foods to help maintain your child's tolerance.

If your child has a food allergy, it is important to avoid that food and read labels to make sure that it is not listed as an ingredient. If you think your child might have a food allergy, talk to your child's health care provider.





### Choking hazards

Hard foods, small and round foods, and smooth and sticky foods can block your child's airway. Hard candies or cough drops, gum, popcorn, marshmallows, peanuts or other nuts, seeds, fish with bones, or snacks using toothpicks or skewers should be avoided if your child is less than four years of age.

These foods are safer when prepared as follows:

- Grate raw carrots and hard fruits (e.g., apples)
- Remove the pits from fruits
- Chop or quarter grapes
- Spread peanut butter thinly
- Finely chop fibrous or stringy foods (e.g., celery or pineapple)
- Although not an everyday food choice, dice or cut lengthwise hot dogs or sausages

### Multi-vitamin and mineral supplements

Multi-vitamin and mineral supplements are usually not needed. Your child may need a vitamin or mineral supplement if they:

- Have a restricted food intake
- Eat a low variety of foods
- Have a medical condition that has special nutrient needs

Talk to your child's health care provider if you think they need a vitamin or mineral supplement. They can help decide if one is needed as well as give dosing instructions. Keep the supplement container in a safe place that your child cannot get to. If they think of them as candy and have more than the recommended dose, it can be dangerous.

### Shopping and cooking together

Shopping together can be a good way to introduce your child to new foods, without the pressure of eating it. Once you get home, they can help you put it away.

Inviting children into the kitchen and having fun preparing and cooking is also a great way for them to become more comfortable with foods. Not only are you teaching them a life skill, they may also feel a sense of pride when they help create a meal. Children are more likely to try food they help prepare and everyone sits down and enjoys the meal together.

### Feeding challenges

If your child seems happy and healthy and their growth has been normal, picky eating and temporary changes in appetite are normal behaviours. However, there are times when mealtimes can become more challenging. Try some of the strategies on the back page, remembering that all family members need to be consistent in their approach.



Food group	Suggested amounts to offer children 12-24 months old
<b>Vegetables and Fruit</b> Offer at least one dark green and one orange vegetable or orange fruit each day.	15-60 mL (1-4 Tbsp) or ¼-½ medium fresh, frozen or canned fruit 15-60 mL (1-4 Tbsp) fresh, frozen or canned vegetables 30-60 mL (2 Tbsp-¼ cup) (1-2 oz) 100% juice
<b>Grain Products</b> Offer whole grain products such as whole grain wheat, pot barley, brown rice and whole oats each day.	¼-½ slice bread ⅛-¼ 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
<b>Milk and Alternatives</b> 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
<b>Meat and Alternatives</b> Offer beans, lentils and tofu often. Offer fish at least two times a week. See <a href="#">A guide to eating fish for women, children and families</a> .	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 ½-1 egg 5-15 mL (1 tsp-1 Tbsp) peanut butter

Food group	Suggested amounts to offer children 2-5 years old
<b>Vegetables and Fruit</b> Offer at least one dark green and one orange vegetable or orange fruit each day.	60-125 mL (¼-½ cup) or ½-1 medium fresh, frozen or canned fruit 60-125 mL (¼-½ cup) fresh, frozen or canned vegetables 60-125 mL (¼-½ cup) 100% juice
<b>Grain Products</b> Offer whole grain products such as whole grain wheat, pot barley, brown rice and whole oats each day.	½-1 slice bread ¼-½ bagel, pita or tortilla 15-30 g cold cereal 125-175 mL (½-¾ cup) cooked cereal 60-125 mL (¼-½ cup) cooked pasta, rice or couscous
<b>Milk and Alternatives</b> Offer 500 mL (2 cups) (16 oz) of milk each day.	125-250 mL (½-1 cup) skim, 1% or 2% M.F. milk 25-50 g (1-1½ oz) cheese 100-175 g (½-¾ cup) yogurt
<b>Meat and Alternatives</b> Offer beans, lentils and tofu often. Offer fish at least two times a week. See <a href="#">A guide to eating fish for women, children and families</a> .	35-75 g (1¼-2½ oz) cooked fish, poultry or lean meat 100-175 mL (½-¾ cup) tofu or cooked beans or lentils 1-2 eggs 15-30 mL (1-2 Tbsp) peanut butter



Challenge	Strategy
Refusing to try new foods	It can take more than ten tries of a new food before your child might feel comfortable enough to eat it. Keep offering it regularly without pressure and stay neutral. Also, if you role model eating that food, there is a higher chance they will one day eat it as well.
Not eating much	Keep a consistent routine with two and half to three hour breaks between meals and snacks.
Not eating at all	Offer food that they can feed themselves and include at least one healthy food they usually enjoy.
Eating a lot	Trust your child to follow their hunger cues. Restricting food can cause them to stop listening to their internal hunger and fullness cues and actually lead to becoming overweight.
Wanting foods other than what you made	Once you have prepared the food, avoid going back into the kitchen to get them something else. Remember, you decide what's going to be offered.
Wanting the same food over and over	If the food is a healthy food, there is no harm in offering their "favourite food" daily. They will likely get tired of eating it soon enough. Just make sure you keep offering other healthy foods too.
Leaving the table or coming and going	Set boundaries during mealtime. If they continue to leave the table, let your child know mealtime will be over (and mean it). Don't keep them at the table longer than 20 to 30 minutes.
Bribing them with dessert	It is tempting to offer a "prize" or "reward" for eating, but when you do, you actually may be teaching your child to prefer the "prize" or dessert food. Instead, if there is a dessert, make it a healthier one (e.g., yogurt with fruit) and offer it regardless of how much or how little they eat.
Only eating if the TV is on	TV will distract your child and cause mealtimes to take too long. If they are not interested in eating, let them down from the table and do not give food again for two and a half to three hours.

## For more information

You can speak to a registered dietitian at no cost by calling [EatRight Ontario](http://www.ontario.ca/eatright) at 1-877-510-5102 or by going to [www.ontario.ca/eatright](http://www.ontario.ca/eatright). For additional nutrition resources see our Feeding Young Children section at [www.york.ca/nutrition](http://www.york.ca/nutrition):

- [A parent's guide to children's weight](#)
- [Can food affect my child's behaviour?](#)
- [Changing yuck to yum! Ten tips to help your child become a good eater...](#)

- [Choking prevention tips](#)
- [Cooking up some fun](#)
- [Finger foods](#)
- [Feeding your vegetarian child](#)
- [Iron and your child](#)
- [When your child does not drink milk](#)
- [When your child does not eat meat](#)
- [When your child does not eat vegetables](#)

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