

Healthy eating and play for toddlers (1–2 YEARS)



Nutrition

The world is a fun and exciting place, as toddlers begin to explore life independently. Encourage your toddler to enjoy family meals, try a wide variety of foods, and play actively every day.

What do toddlers need to eat?

Offer toddlers the same healthy foods as the family, with a variety of textures and flavours.

Encourage a variety of food from these groups:

- vegetables and beans/legumes
- fruits
- grains and cereals
- meat, fish, chicken, eggs, legumes
- full-fat dairy products such as milk, cheese and yoghurt.
Reduced fat dairy products can be used after two years of age

Who is in charge at mealtimes?

Children sense how much food their bodies need and eat enough to match this. But children lose this natural ability, if forced to over-eat or finish all the food on their plate. Help children to learn about their body's hunger cues. To promote healthy eating and happy mealtimes;

The parent's role is to decide: **which** foods to offer children, **when** to offer food and **where** to offer food.

The child's role is to decide: **whether** they eat, **what** they eat and **how much** they eat.

This approach helps to set up mealtime routines and healthy eating habits for the future.

Why does my child seem to eat less than before?

Children's eating patterns often change in the toddler years, and picky eating is common. Some of the reasons for changes in eating are:

Slower growth

Children grow slower in their second year, which means toddlers need less food than during their first year. Amounts eaten can also change each day. This can be worrying for parents, but is normal and does not mean your child is unwell or being difficult. Keep offering a variety of foods and enjoy mealtimes together.

Development

The world has become a new and exciting place for your toddler to explore. Food may be less important when there are so many other things to do.

Fussy eating

Showing independence is normal for toddlers and may include refusing to eat food that were previously enjoyed. Refusing food does not always mean that your child does not like it – they may just be testing to see your reaction. Some pointers are:

- serve your toddler the same foods as the rest of the family; separate meals are not necessary
- offer new foods in a relaxed environment with foods your child already eats
- turn off the television and screens, and remove toys
- sit together to eat whenever possible. Toddlers learn by watching and copying others
- it can take several times for children to learn to accept and enjoy new foods so keep offering
- encourage, but don't force your child to eat
- do not assume your child dislikes a particular food
- let your child touch and play with food; allow for some mess as they learn to eat
- let your child feed themselves and give help if needed
- remove food after 20 minutes or so, if your child loses interest
- less healthy snacks such as chocolate or ice cream should not be offered as alternatives. Children quickly learn to refuse healthy options in preference for these foods
- be a positive role model – eat well and your child will copy you
- help your toddler learn when they hungry or full. End the meal if your child is tired, irritable or unwell

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Eating patterns

Toddlers may prefer small, regular snacks instead of a traditional meal pattern. As a guide, offer three small main meals, and 2–3 snacks each day. Allow 1½–2 hours between each meal and snack. Offer nutritious snacks of fruits, milk products and whole grain cereals.

What should I offer my child to drink?

Offer all drinks in a cup. Some children fill up on drinks, such as milk or sweet drinks leaving less room for food. Drinking sweet drinks regularly can also cause excess weight gain and tooth decay.

- give food first, then drinks at mealtimes and snacks
- offer up to three small drinks of full fat milk each day and water at other times. More than 2–3 cups of milk and dairy products can displace foods such as meats and vegetables. Reduced fat milk and dairy products can be offered to children over two years of age
- calcium-enriched soy and other plant-based milks (e.g., rice, oat) can be used after 12 months of age, if these are full-fat and your toddler eats other foods such as meat, lentils, and eggs

When should I worry about eating?

Many parents worry about their toddler's eating, because food intake and appetite are different every day. This is normal for toddlers. Ask your GP or maternal and child health nurse for advice if:

- you are worried about your child's growth or health
- your child is unwell often; tired and not eating
- mealtimes are causing lots of stress and anxiety

What to avoid?

- Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial, soft drink and flavoured water are not needed. Unpasteurised milks, caffeinated drinks, tea, coffee and herbal drinks are also not recommended
- Processed foods with high levels of fat, sugar and/or salt (e.g. biscuits, chips, fried foods) are not recommended for toddlers. Eating these foods is linked with obesity, tooth decay and poor eating habits in the future
- Young children should always be seated and supervised when eating
- Avoid small hard foods such as whole nuts and hard lollies

Encourage active play everyday

Active play is important for your toddler's development. Benefits include:

- building strong muscles and bones
- maintaining healthy growth
- improving sleep
- making friends through sharing and taking turns
- developing movement skills

Outdoor play is ideal for toddlers and costs nothing. Outdoor places to play are everywhere and can be as simple as finding some sand, water, leaves or stones. Play materials such as tyres, large soft beach balls, and cardboard boxes encourage imagination and provide opportunities for learning. Copying other people being active and moving to music also makes play fun for toddlers.

- the best physical activity for toddlers is unstructured free play; encourage at least three hours spread throughout each day
- no more than 60 minutes a day should be spent sitting or lying still at a time, except during sleep
- for toddlers under two years, screen time (e.g. television, computer, iPad) is not recommended
- for children over two, screen time should be less than one hour a day and supervised
- let your toddler walk short distances instead of using a stroller
- enjoy active time together as a family

Important tips for toddler eating and play

- parents decide **what** food to offer, **when** and **where** to offer it
- children decide **whether** they will eat and **how** much
- encourage active play everyday
- limit inactive time such as sitting in front of a screen
- help your toddler to learn when they are hungry or full
- seek advice if worried about your toddler's growth, appetite or development

Nutrition

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