



Know Your Toddler

1. Growth Rate Slows

A child's weight triples during the first year of growth. During year 2 it will be quadruple the birth weight. Between the ages of 1 and 9 a child will gain from 4.5 to 6.5 pounds a year.

2. Food Consumption Decreases

Toddlers' appetites decrease due to the slower growth rate and their desire to exert their independence. "Erratic and sporadic" best describes a toddler's appetite. Overall weekly intake is more important than individual meals or days.

3. Independence Increases

Toddlers explore everything as they test their independence. By establishing limits, parents help toddlers learn to balance permissiveness and control.

4. Motor Skills Increase

Toddlers develop fine motor skills and will use any opportunity to display these skills. Parents and caregivers can help by providing a variety of foods, including finger foods, plus child-sized utensils so that children can practice their new skills.

Food for 'ME TOO'

Nutrition for the Toddler and Preschooler

Getting off to a good start

Food habits begin at an early age and have lifelong implications. A poorly nourished child may be restless, irritable, or more withdrawn than a well-nourished child. Limited food choices may prevent a child from having the nutrients or energy needed to promote growth and development in mental, social, and physical activities.

Adults are role models

Children are most likely to learn healthy eating habits when parents and other influential adults eat nutritiously. Adult role models are the most important influence on what a child learns to eat. Toddlers especially watch others closely and are great imitators. They develop good food habits if a variety of nutritious foods is offered in a pleasant, relaxed setting. Remember, actions always make a stronger impression than words.

The majority of toddlers are ready to join family eating routines by the end of their first year. Consider using the division of responsibility as described by Ellyn Satter (see resources) in which the parent decides the **what, when, and where of feeding** and the child determines **how much and whether to eat**. Using the division of responsibility eliminates the child-parent struggle around food.

It is a parent's responsibility to offer a variety of nutritious/healthy food options, and it is the child's responsibility to determine how much to eat. Children need a variety of foods to provide all the nutrients necessary to support normal growth and development.





Our children are at risk.

- One in four of 2- to 5-year-olds is at risk of being overweight.
- Overweight children are 43.5 times more likely to have at least three risk factors for heart disease.
- One in three American children born in 2000 will become diabetic during their lifetime.
- Preschoolers are getting too much sugar and juice and not enough fruits and vegetables. Toddlers should consume no more than 3/4 cup of juice as part of their 5 1/2-cup daily intake of fruit. Fruit juice should be 100% fruit juice.
- Children of color are at greater risk for nutrition-related health problems.

Common Eating Patterns

These descriptions show how a child's normal changes and growth patterns affect eating habits. The swings in behavior and growth rate can explain many of the difficulties parents experience during development of a child's eating patterns.

1 to 2 years

- Appetite drops as growth slows
- Learns to drink from cup; usually is weaned
- May cut back to about 2 cups of milk daily
- Learns to bring food to mouth with spoon
- Likes to feed self but will likely need some help
- Copies others and will eat many family foods
- Cutting teeth and may have difficulty chewing
- Has acute taste buds and can detect slight differences in foods
- Develops likes and dislikes; likes sweet foods
- Likes to touch and play with food; responds to food texture
- Learns to say "No" and becomes more independent

2 to 3 years

- Has improved muscle control; can use spoon and fork easily
- Often desires and requests desserts and sweets
- Will wait a little for requests to be filled
- Usually will eat raw vegetables, but may refuse salads
- Finds green vegetables more acceptable
- Can make simple food choices: "Would you like a peach or a pear?"

4 to 5 years

- May refuse to eat all but a handful of foods
- Influenced by others: other children, television ads, teachers, etc.
- Likes plain cooking and foods separated on the plate
- Dislikes most mixed food dishes and gravies
- By age 5, often has fewer demands and will accept food available
- Appetite is gradually increasing

Create a positive atmosphere

Family mealtime is more than nourishment. A pleasant mealtime atmosphere also encourages the development of children's self-esteem and independence, as well as their motor, social, and language skills. Children practice their motor skills as they spoon foods from serving dishes to their plates and as they pass food dishes to others. They observe and practice social and language skills through family conversation during the meal. Besides demonstrating good eating habits and proper table manners, other family members can use mealtime to share stories about their daily activities. A comfortable and relaxing atmosphere promotes physical and emotional growth for the whole family.

A toddler's eating schedule may not always follow an adult's schedule, but including the toddler at the family meal encourages a lifelong habit of meal sharing. On days when a child is tired or cranky, it may be best to feed the child early. Provide a separate meal or a small nutritious snack, such as a whole wheat cracker or piece of fruit, until the meal is ready. A short walk, game of tag, or swinging with the child while the meal is being prepared is an excellent way to pass the time while being physically active.

The power of advertising

Children are strongly influenced by what they see and hear. Parents compete with thousands of food commercials and billions in advertising directed specifically toward children annually.

Making healthy choices when eating out and using convenience food is challenging. Fast-food meals and convenience foods tend to provide more calories, fat, carbohydrate, added sugars, and sugar-sweetened beverages and less fiber, milk, fruits, and nonstarchy vegetables than other meal choices.

Parents and day care providers need to be role models by providing a wide variety of nutritious food in appropriate amounts.

Building a strong partnership between providers and parents will help ensure that children's food needs are met and that a good foundation of food habits and physical activity is established.

Sample Menus for Toddlers and Preschoolers*

- * Portions are appropriate for 4- to 6-year-olds. Offer 2- to 3-year-olds 1/2 to 3/4 as much.
- ** Fruit juice is part of daily fruit intake; choose 100% fruit juice (not fruit drink or punch).

(4 eating episodes per day)

Morning:

Fruit Group..... Banana, 1/2 medium
Bread Group..... Ready-to-eat cereal, 1 ounce
Bread Group..... Toast, 1 slice
Milk Group..... Milk, 1 cup
Fats and Sweets..... Margarine and jam

Lunch:

Meats and Breads..... Peanut butter sandwich
Vegetable Group..... Grated carrots with raisins, 1/2 cup
Fruit Group..... 1 medium orange
Milk Group..... Milk, 1 cup
Fats and Sweets..... Jelly (on sandwich)

Mid-afternoon:

Vegetable Group..... Green/red pepper strips with dip
Bread Group..... Whole wheat crackers, 4
Beverage..... Water or fruit juice**

Supper:

Meat Group..... Chicken leg
Bread Group..... Rice, 1/2 cup
Vegetable Group..... Broccoli, 1 stalk
Milk Group..... Milk, 1 cup
Fruit Group..... Peach slices
Fats and Sweets..... Tapioca pudding

(5 eating episodes per day)

Breakfast:

Fruit Group..... Orange juice, 1/2 cup
Meat Group..... 1 egg (scrambled)
Bread Group..... Toast, 1 slice
Fats and Sweets..... Margarine
Milk Group..... Milk, 1 cup

Mid-morning:

Bread Group..... Graham cracker, 2 squares
Milk Group..... Milk or flavored yogurt, 1 cup

Noon:

Meats and Breads..... Ground beef balls with tomato and macaroni, 3/4 cup
Vegetable Group..... Peas, 1/2 cup
Fruit Group..... Pear, 1/2 sliced
Milk Group..... Milk, 1 cup

Mid-afternoon:

Meat Group..... Peanut butter, 2 tablespoons
Bread Group..... Toast
Fruit Group..... Banana slices
Beverage..... Water

Supper:

Meat Group..... Baked fish, 2 ounces
Vegetable Group..... Potato, 1 medium
Bread Group..... Cornbread, 1 small piece
Fats and Sweets..... Margarine
Fruit Group..... Apple, 1/2 sliced
Beverage..... Water

15 tips for surviving the toddler roller coaster

A toddler's emotional and physical growth, as well as eating habits, change dramatically between 1 and 5 years of age. Behaviors tend to swing about every 6 months and can range from balanced to difficult.

1. Children prefer fairly dependable daily routines, including meal and snack times.
2. Children have small stomachs and often need to eat more than three times a day. For healthy snack ideas to offer between meals, see "Snacks for Healthy Kids" (PM 1264).



3. Save highly sugared foods, soda, fruit-flavored drinks, and candies for occasional special treats.
4. Serve kid-size portions. One tablespoon of food per year of age between 2 and 4 years is usually enough.
5. Children's special plates, bowls, and smaller utensils help control portion sizes. Plates with edges help the child scoop up their food.
6. Giving children choices from each food group helps them learn how to include a variety of foods in their daily intake. Allowing them to serve themselves also promotes eating in amounts according to hunger, rather than expecting them to finish a predetermined amount.
7. Limit the number of food choices offered at a time. Plan meals to include one food that the child likes and continue to offer new foods from each of the food groups.
8. Milk and fruit juice are healthy choices but should not be offered in unlimited quantities. When toddlers eat or drink too much of only a few foods, they may miss the nutrients they need from other foods. Toddlers need 16 to 24 ounces (2 to 3 cups) of milk per day.
9. Cut foods into bite-sized pieces before the child is at the table. Children are unable to handle cutting with a fork or knife and will likely have a tantrum if they are not allowed to try.
10. Many children are hesitant to accept new foods and textures. Colorful foods and unusual shapes appeal to children. Continue to offer new foods, but don't bribe the child.
11. Children are often sensitive to food temperature and texture. Most do not like very hot or very cold foods; many dislike lumpy or stringy foods.
12. Children prefer moist rather than dry meats. Store ready-to-cook ground beef patties in the freezer to use when serving less "child-friendly" meats to the rest of the family.
13. Avoid overcooking vegetables. Many children prefer them raw. Wash raw fruits and vegetables well before serving and offer to appropriate age levels to avoid choking hazards.
14. Children under school age can choke easily on some foods, including nuts, popcorn, pits or seeds from fruit, and pieces of raw vegetables. Round, firm foods tend to be the greatest risk for choking.
15. "Force-feeding" a child by coaxing or giving rewards is seldom successful. Children can learn to control their parents by refusing to eat. If your child dawdles over a meal longer than 30 minutes, remove the plate without comment and limit or omit snacks before the next meal. Do not call attention to your action or act as if you are punishing the child.

Additional Resources

- Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Nutrition and Wellness Resources—www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/nutrition
- Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Store—store.extension.iastate.edu
- Ellyn Satter Institute—www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/how-to-feed/the-division-of-responsibility-in-feeding/

Revised by Ruth Litchfield, PhD, RD, LD, nutrition and wellness state specialist, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Originally prepared by Elizabeth Schafer, PhD.

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