

# FACT SHEET

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## Feeding the Preschooler

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Each child is an individual—he has a distinct pattern of growth. However, all children grow through similar developmental stages. Following a period of rapid growth in infancy, preschool years are characterized by slower growth rates. A child's growth rate diminishes gradually to the lowest level of childhood during the second and third years. Correspondingly, energy needs between 1½ to 3 years of age are relatively low as compared with earlier and later periods.

Food plays an important part in the growth of preschool children. Although the child may not appear to be growing very fast in height or weight, internal developments are occurring. For example, muscles grow in size and strength more rapidly than the rest of the body. Their size increases by about one-third. As the child develops strength and coordination in standing and walking alone, muscles and bones become increasingly important.

Proper diet, with enough sleep and exercise, help make a healthy child. A healthy child is happy and bright-eyed, has clear smooth skin, shining hair and straight bones. A healthy, growing child is full of life and energy; he is easily discouraged if he cannot complete a task. A preschool child has some teeth, can chew and likes to feed himself. A variable appetite is characteristic.

Pleasant experiences with food are important during the preschool years as food habits and attitudes are formed that will last throughout life.

### CHILDREN ARE INDIVIDUALS

No two children are alike. Be prepared for your child to be different. Although children grow through similar stages, each child has a unique growth pattern. Some children walk before 1 year; others may not walk until several months later. Teeth appear at various ages. Rapid growth is followed by periods of slower growth. A child's appetite may vary with growth. That is, during slower growth periods the child may not want as much food as during rapid growth.

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Appetite may vary from meal to meal as well as from day to day. His appetite may lag if he is overtired, excited, in strange surroundings or if his routine has been changed. A healthy child is likely to have a good appetite when he has enough sleep, exercise and good food. Most healthy children know when they are hungry and when they have had enough to eat. Children tend to rebel when forced to eat; force-feeding should be avoided.

A child's body build is also unique to the individual. Some children have greater amounts of muscle or body fat than others.

Children like security; they need and want regular meals. This is also an opportunity for the family to be together in a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere.

Food means something special to children; it satisfies their hunger. A positive attitude toward food is formed, and the child learns the pleasant feeling he gets from eating. Children will be curious, cautious and sometimes rebellious toward food, especially when new foods are introduced. New foods are strange, and have different tastes, textures and shapes than foods they are used to eating.

### HE'S HUNGRY—WHAT SHALL I FEED HIM?

Children require the same foods as adults but in different amounts. By the end of his first year, a child should be eating a variety of foods. Even when the growth rate diminishes during the second year, there is a continuous need for a well-balanced diet that supplies nutrients needed for growth and maintenance. By 2 years of age, a child has learned to know and like most of the common foods he will eat throughout life. The need for some of the basic nutrients—protein, calcium, vitamins A, C and the B-vitamins—and calories increases throughout the preschool years. This increase corresponds to the gradual increase in body size during this period.

A good plan to follow in planning the child's meals as well as the family's meals is the Daily Food Guide. This consists of four food groups.

**Milk Group**—Milk is essential in the diet of preschool children. It is an important source of calcium, a mineral necessary for formation of strong bones and teeth. During the first year milk is the most necessary food item, and this need continues although other foods become increasingly important. Do not force milk upon a child, or negative attitudes might build up. A child should not be fed milk in such large quantities that he fills up and does not have room for other foods.

The amount of milk recommended for preschool children is 2 to 3 cups daily, although 3 cups may be too much for some children to drink. Cheese and ice cream, for example, may be substituted to fill the daily quota.

Fortified milk is a good source of vitamin D which is essential for proper bone development. A quart of fortified milk contains the amount of vitamin D needed daily for growing children. If less than a quart of fortified milk is consumed daily, the child may need to take vitamin D supplements.

**Meat Group**—The meat group includes meat, poultry, fish, eggs, peanut butter and dried beans or peas. These foods are especially important for their protein contribution to the diet. Protein helps build strong, healthy muscles and other body tissues, promotes growth and helps resist infection.

A child needs at least two servings of meat each day. During the early preschool years, the size of the serving is 2 ounces of meat or one egg. When the child is 5, he probably will be eating the same serving as adults:

3 ounces of meat  
2 eggs  
1 cup cooked dry beans or peas  
4 tablespoons peanut butter

**Fruit and Vegetable Group**—This food group helps build strong bones, promote growth and contribute to the general well-being of the child. Dark green leafy and yellow vegetables are good food sources of vitamin A, which helps maintain healthy skin and develop good eyesight. Include a vitamin A-rich food in the diet at least every other day.

Fruits, particularly citrus fruits, are outstanding sources of vitamin C. Children require adequate supplies of vitamin C each day for the formation of various tissues in the body.

Four servings of fruits and vegetables are recommended each day. Serve a variety of vegetables so that the child is exposed to different flavors and textures. A serving of fruit or vegetable consists of 1 tablespoon for each year of age until a half cup is reached. Thus, 4 tablespoons or ¼ cup would be considered a serving for a 4-year old.

**Bread and Cereal Group**—This food group supplies energy for the active preschooler. Enriched breads and cereals are good sources of iron and the B-vitamins. Iron helps build healthy red blood. The B-vitamins primarily maintain a good digestive tract and help the body use

energy from foods. Four servings daily are recommended in this food group for children and adults. Serve cereal daily. The size serving will vary with the child's appetite. Generally, it is not difficult to meet the recommendation of this food group because the foods are well-liked and easily chewed by the preschooler. At times it may be necessary to cut down on the intake of these foods so that other foods may be eaten in recommended quantities.

## IT'S FUN TO EAT

Serve children foods from each of the four food groups daily. If the child does not like a food from one of the groups, substitute another food from the same group. Studies from nursery school children suggest that they enjoy eating when food is served attractively.

Following are pointers for serving and preparing foods for preschool children:

### Milk

- Serve milk at room temperature, at least for the early preschool years.
- Use small glasses that fit the child's hand. Refill when necessary. This enables the child to feed himself. A large glass looks like too much.
- Let an older child pour his milk from a pitcher.
- Try introducing new flavors to milk, such as chocolate and fruit.
- Serve foods containing milk, such as cooked cereal, custard, ice cream and cottage cheese.
- Cut cheese in cubes. These are good finger foods.
- Use low temperatures when cooking milk or cheese.

### Meat

- Make serving sizes small.
- Serve only tender meats before age 2 or 3, the age at which teeth appear.
- Serve meat ground or cut up into bite-size portions.
- Remove skin and bones. A child may eat the bite-size pieces with his hands.
- Keep flavorings and seasonings mild; children prefer bland foods.
- Serve a variety of meats: sauteed liver, well-done pot roast, hamburger, meat loaf, tender steaks, chopped chicken, hot dogs, fish (with bones removed).
- Cook meats slowly at low temperature. Children prefer juicy, tender and moist meats.

### Fruits and Vegetables

- Prepare foods so the child can chew them. For example, carrot strips and unpeeled crisp apples are not appropriate for a one-year old. Instead, serve cooked carrots or apple sauce.
- Use fruits and vegetables to add color to the meal.

- Serve uncooked soft fruits such as bananas or ripe peaches and cooked vegetables to a child of any age.
- Add chewy fruits to the diet as teeth erupt. Serve bland, delicate-flavored fruits.
- Serve finger foods such as raw carrot strips, pepper rings and turnip strips to the older preschool child.
- Serve some vegetables (especially the strong-flavored vegetables—spinach, cabbage, cauliflower) raw if the child does not like them cooked.
- Serve fruits, fruit juices and vegetables as snacks.
- Cook vegetables for a short time in a small amount of water. Season lightly.

#### *Breads and Cereals*

- Serve only enriched breads and cereals.
- Serve the younger preschooler cooked cereals, and the older preschooler ready-to-eat cereals.
- Chop fresh fruits and serve on cereals.
- Cut toast in interesting shapes (squares, circles). This makes food fun to eat for children.
- Make small sandwiches of a meat spread, peanut butter, or soft cheese as finger foods.

Make eating a pleasant experience for children. Teach the child to eat his meal with the family; children are great imitators and learn good eating habits from adults. However, at first it may be desirable for him to eat at his own table in the kitchen where spills and splatters make no difference. Make mealtime a happy time for children.

- Give the child a chance to quiet down before mealtime. He cannot enjoy the meal if he is tired or overexcited.
- Use child-size dishes and utensils the child can handle. He will enjoy feeding himself.
- Allow the child some freedom in the choice of foods served. This enables him to develop independence and feel grown up like the other family members.
- Serve small servings. A plate piled with food is discouraging to a child. It is better to serve seconds than to have food left on the plate. Do not force-feed a child. If he is not hungry, do not make a fuss over it. His appetite may be lagging, and he will eat when hungry.
- Serve attractive and colorful food. Cut foods so that the child can handle them.
- Serve meals at regular times. Make mealtime a relaxed and calm time. Do not rush through the meal.
- Allow the child to eat by himself. He will spill food and finger food with his hands. This is natural, and one way a child learns the feel and texture of foods. Do not expect table manners until he has developed skill in eating and feels more grown-up.
- Introduce new foods in small amounts along with the favorite foods. It is best to serve new foods at the

beginning of the meal. Serve the food in a form which is easily handled and can be chewed. Have a positive attitude about the food. If the child does not like the food, do not make an issue of it; serve it again in a different way.

#### **ONLY THREE MEALS A DAY . . .**

A preschool child generally eats the same foods as adults. Include foods from the four groups. Usually included in a good diet for a preschool child are:

Milk	2 to 3 cups
Egg	1
Meat, poultry, fish	1 to 3 ounces
Potato	1 medium
Vegetable (green leafy or or deep yellow)	2 to 4 tablespoons
Other vegetables	2 to 4 tablespoons
Fruit for vitamin C	4 ounces orange or ¾ cup tomato juice
Other fruit	2 to 4 tablespoons
Cereal	1/3 to 2/3 cup
Bread	1 to 3 slices
Butter/Margarine	
Vitamin D as fortified milk or as a concentrate	

An example of how these foods may be grouped into a daily meal plan is:

Breakfast	fruit or juice cereal with milk toast butter/margarine milk
Lunch	meat or meat substitute vegetable bread butter/margarine fruit milk
Dinner	meat or meat substitute vegetables (2) bread butter/margarine fruit or milk dessert milk

#### **. . . PLUS SNACKS**

Most children eat more than three meals a day. Their stomachs are small, and they cannot hold as much food as an adult. Therefore, snacks help the child last from one meal to the next. Serve nutritious snacks, such as milk, carrot strips, fruit juice, fruit, crackers or toast.

Do not serve sweet foods such as candy, cakes, cookies and soft drinks as habitual snacks. Most children develop a strong liking for these foods, and prefer to eat them rather than nutritious snacks. Therefore, teach them to eat them at the end of the meal. Sweets dull the appetite and cause the child not to want his regular meal. This is particularly important during the early preschool years when the preschooler's appetite is diminished naturally. Do not offer sweets as bribes for eating needed foods.

Nutritious foods taken from the suggested meal plan to serve as snacks include:

fruit juice	peanut butter or oatmeal cookies
milk	cheese cubes
fruit	dry cereal
small sandwiches	ice cream

## MY CHILD WON'T EAT

Food habits are learned early in life, and are hard to break whether good or bad. In some respects the second year is the hardest year for a child in eating. He is being offered new and different foods; he is trying to feed himself and develop independence; he is often frustrated at what he cannot do. Parents can help children by understanding some of these problems and how to cope with them.

One of the most common problems among preschoolers is their refusal to eat. This is normal, and the child should not be forced, bribed or punished. Omitting a meal occasionally will not harm a healthy child. Perhaps he ate too many snacks or a sweet snack before mealtime. The typical preschooler has a variable appetite, and some days he may not be hungry. The child may be asserting his independence by refusing to eat.

Another problem is food dislike. The child may not like the food, or he may be asserting his independence again. When a child does not like a food, do not make an issue of the situation. After serving the food a reasonable

length of time, remove it, and try serving a different way. The child simply may not like the food. Children are entitled to food likes and dislikes just as adults are.

Food "jags" are common among children, and occur when a food or certain food combinations are eaten often. This is normal. The best way to handle this problem is to avoid making an issue because it probably will not last long. Humor the child for a few days.

A child often dawdles over meals. Because his attention span is short, he may lose interest after the first pangs of hunger are satisfied. If the child learns that this will make a scene at the table he may use this as a way of getting attention. After a reasonable amount of time remove the food and do not offer any until the next meal. Sometimes the child may dawdle over the food if it looks like too much, so serve smaller amounts. Do not rush the child through the meal—he just may be a slow eater.

Children will eat if you let them. It is normal for preschool children to have variable appetites. A child will form his eating pattern and habits. Adults can help by understanding the child during this period and by serving as good examples.