

# Snacking

for children up to 5



Islington **NHS**  
Primary Care Trust

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When it comes to healthy eating it is important to remember that children are not just little adults. Children up to five need to get lots of nutrients and energy from their food because they are growing and developing so quickly. But small children only have tiny tummies and cannot usually cope with big meals. Therefore the food they eat has to be full of nutrients.

It is important that small children eat regularly and that meals and snacks are spaced out evenly throughout the day. If the time gap is too big your child may become hungry and grumpy. But if the snack is just before the next meal then your child may not be hungry enough to eat their meal.

A variety of snacks should be offered including fruit, vegetables, yoghurts, dips, other savoury foods and any type of bread including sandwiches. Breast milk is also a healthy snack. It is best to avoid giving sweets, sweet

biscuits, cakes, chocolate or sugary and fizzy drinks as these foods are bad for your child's teeth and do not contain many other nutrients. Give dried fruit and fruit juice (diluted 1 part juice to 10 parts water) as part of a snack or meal, rather than on their own. This helps to prevent tooth decay.

It is good to let young children feed themselves. Offer foods they can hold in their hands, such as slices of fruit, raw or cooked vegetables, or fingers of bread.



## Ideas for nutritious snacks:

- 🍌 Dairy foods such as cubes of cheese and crackers or plain yoghurt with fruit
- 🍌 Fresh fruit such as satsuma, banana, seedless grapes, kiwi, plum (with stone removed), slices of apple, pear, melon, mango or pineapple or berries, such as strawberries and raspberries. Choose fruits in season and those that are grown locally, where possible
- 🍌 Tinned fruit in juice can be used, for example, in fruit kebabs or added to yoghurt or fromage frais
- 🍌 Vegetables such as peeled, raw or cooked carrots, sweet pepper, cherry tomatoes, cucumber, raw or cooked green beans or celery with dips such as avocado, houmous or yoghurt mixed with chives or mint with finely chopped cucumber
- 🍌 Savoury biscuits such as crispbreads, oatcakes, breadsticks, cream crackers, matzos, rice waffles, melba toast. Some of these foods can be high in salt, so choose those lower in salt\*
- 🍌 Any type of bread (use a variety of white, brown, wholemeal, granary or crusty breads, including toast); crumpets, English muffins, bagels, scones, pitta bread or sandwiches. Look for breads that are lower in salt\* where available. Suitable fillings for sandwiches might be meat (for example cold roast meats, chicken, ham, corned beef, meat paste), mild pasteurised cheeses, such as mild cheddar cheese, cottage cheese, fish paste, mashed pilchards or sardines, tuna, hard boiled, scrambled or poached egg, peanut butter or tahini (if your child does not suffer from allergies to these foods), houmous, roast vegetables, baked beans, bean pâté, banana, salad or combinations of these
- 🍌 A slice of vegetable pizza
- 🍌 Homemade plain popcorn
- 🍌 Small bowl of breakfast cereal (choose low salt and sugar varieties\*) with milk
- 🍌 Do not give whole nuts to children under 5 years of age as they may choke.

\* Low salt varieties have less than 1.5g salt per 100g (0.6g sodium per 100g). Low sugar varieties have less than 15g sugar per 100g.

## Snack and meal presentation

- 🕒 The way food looks is very important, especially for young children, therefore try to present the food in an attractive, child-friendly way – make it interesting and colourful. Do not put too much food on the plate – you can always offer more later
- 🕒 Try not to rush a meal, as your child may be slow to eat, yet try not to let meals drag on for too long – half an hour is about right
- 🕒 Try to eat in a calm, relaxed area, without a television on – children are easily distracted
- 🕒 It is important to make sure that mealtimes are enjoyable rather than a battleground. Try to keep calm.
- 🕒 Try to eat together. Sit at the table with your child and eat something, even if it is just a piece of fruit. Children learn from those around them
- 🕒 Get your child involved with the food. Let your young child feed themselves by giving them finger foods or their own spoon. Slightly older children can help with simple food preparation or laying the table



☺ Babies and toddlers can be very messy eaters. If your child is eating happily but messily then you have achieved the most important aim: eating.

Table manners will develop as your child becomes more used to eating food and using a knife and fork. A plastic tablecloth and plastic sheet on the floor will make cleaning up much easier. Hands and face can easily be wiped at the end of the meal.



## Fussy eaters

It is very common for toddlers to go through phases of being fussy about what they eat - sometimes eating very little, refusing to eat certain foods at all (even ones they previously liked) or wanting to eat the same thing day after day. As stressful as this can be, it is rarely harmful. In fact, fussy eating is a normal part of children growing up and asserting their independence.

If you are worried about your child's weight and growth, contact your health visitor, GP or local children's centre for further advice.

### How to cope:

- 🍌 Offer regular meals and snacks, as this is better than letting your child 'pick' through the whole day. However, do not give large snacks or snacks too close to a meal as your child may then not be hungry at mealtime
- 🍌 Your child may not want a food one day but be happy to eat it the next, so keep offering a range of foods. Some children need to taste a food ten times or more before getting used to the taste
- 🍌 Changing the form a food is given in can also make it more appealing. For example, a child might refuse cooked carrots but like eating raw ones





- 🍌 Small children often prefer moist foods, so try serving meals with a sauce or gravy
- 🍌 Do not bribe them into eating something they do not want – for example, do not promise a pudding if they eat their vegetables
- 🍌 Keep sweet foods out of sight until savoury foods have been eaten
- 🍌 Invite children who are good eaters over for a meal to encourage your child to eat

Reference: Caroline Walker Trust: Eating well for under 5s in child care. Nutritional and practical guidelines. 2nd Edition ([www.cwt.org.uk](http://www.cwt.org.uk))

Photographs in this leaflet were taken at Rosedale Early Years Centre by Tessa Hallman and at Kate Greenaway Nursery School and Children's Centre by Lottie Davies.

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