

## Healthy eating for children

As a parent, one of the most important things you do is to help your children learn healthy eating habits. Children need a balanced diet with food from all 3 food groups—vegetables and fruit, whole grain products, and protein foods.

Children need 3 meals a day and 1 to 3 snacks (morning, afternoon and possibly before bed). Healthy snacks are just as important as the food you serve at meals.

The best foods are whole, fresh and unprocessed—fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, dairy, and meats; and home-cooked meals.

## Sugar and sugar substitutes

- Offer foods that don't have added sugar or sugar substitutes. Limit refined sugars (sucrose, glucose-fructose, white sugar) honey, molasses, syrups, and brown sugar. They all have similar calorie counts and also contribute to tooth decay.
- Sugar substitutes, such as aspartame and sucralose, do not add calories or cause tooth decay, but they are much sweeter than sugar and have no nutritional value. They may lead to a habit of only liking sweet foods and make it difficult for your child to adjust to fruits and vegetables. It's a good idea to limit them in your child's diet.

## Juice and water

- Offer water when your child is thirsty, especially between meals and snacks.
- Limit juice to one serving (125 mL [4 oz]) of 100% unsweetened juice a day.
- Serving actual fruit instead of fruit juice adds healthy fibre to your child's diet.
- Sometimes children will drink too much at mealtime or between meals, making them feel full.

# Sodium

Sodium is a mineral that maintains proper fluids in your body. It’s also needed for nerve and muscle function. But, eating too much sodium can lead to high blood pressure, which increases the risk of heart disease. Sodium is commonly referred to as salt.

- Offer your child healthy foods that are low in sodium as often as possible.
- Processed and pre-packaged foods tend to have high amounts of sodium.
- Too much sodium in childhood can lead to a preference for salty food, which is associated with obesity and/or disease later in life.
- Use the % Daily Value (DV) on food labels to compare products. Look for foods with a sodium content of less than 15% DV.
- Keep recommended sodium intake in mind when choosing foods for your child:

Age	Adequate intake (mg/day) <i>(1 level teaspoon of table salt is 2,300 mg)</i>
0 to 6 months	110
7 to 12 months	370
1 to 3 years	800
4 to 8 years	1000
9 to 13 years	1200
14+	1500

*\*Data from the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine*

## What about fat?

Healthy fats contain essential fatty acids like omega-3 and omega-6 that cannot be made in the body and must come from food. Cook with vegetable oils such as canola, olive and/or soybean. Healthy fats are also found in salad dressings, non-hydrogenated margarines, nut butters (e.g. peanut butter) and mayonnaise.

Many fats that are solid at room temperature contain more trans and saturated fats that can raise your risk of heart disease. Limit butter, hard margarines, lard and shortening. Read labels and avoid trans or saturated fats found in many store-bought products, such as cookies, donuts and crackers.

Limit processed meats, such as wieners and luncheon meats, which are also high in fat, sodium (salt), and nitrates (food preservatives).

## As the parent, it's your job to:

- Set regular meal and snack times that work for the whole family. Share mealtimes and eat with your children.
- Offer a balance and variety of foods from all food groups at mealtimes.
- Offer food in ways they can manage easily. For example, cut into pieces, or mash food to prevent choking in younger children.
- Help your children learn to use a spoon or cup so they can eat independently.
- Include your child in age appropriate food preparation and table setting.
- Avoid using dessert as a bribe. Serve healthy dessert choices, such as a fruit cup or yogurt.
- Show your child how you read labels to help you choose foods when shopping.
- Avoiding fast food restaurants shows your children the importance of enjoying mealtime as a family, while eating healthy home cooked meals.

## It's your child's job to:

- Choose what to eat from the foods you provide at meal and snack time (and sometimes that may mean not eating at all).
- Eat as much or as little as they want.

## What if my child is a picky eater?

Don't stress too much if your child refuses a food product or meal. Refrain from giving them something else in between meals just so that they eat. They will eat better at the next meal.

Don't worry too much if your child doesn't seem to be eating enough. If their weight and size is on track, they are probably getting what they need. Just make sure to offer your child a variety of foods from all food groups to make sure they are getting the right nutrients. Your child's doctor will monitor their growth at regular appointments and will let you know if there are any problems.

Children's appetites change from day-to-day, or even from meal to meal. Because they have small stomachs, children need to eat small amounts often throughout the day. Children know how much food they need and will eat the amount that their body needs.

## Additional resources

- Eat Well Central (Health Canada)  
([http://www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/init/eat\\_well-bien\\_manger/index-eng.php](http://www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/init/eat_well-bien_manger/index-eng.php))
- Canada's food guides (Health Canada)  
(<http://www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/eating-nutrition/healthy-eating-saine-alimentation/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php>)
- Follow the Feeding Relationship: Offer Healthy Meals and Snacks (Dietitians of Canada)  
(<https://vimeo.com/channels/875781/116922316>)
- Helping Kids Eat Less Sodium (UnlockFood.ca by Dietitians of Canada)  
(<https://www.unlockfood.ca/en/Articles/Childrens-Nutrition/Healthy-Eating-and-Healthy-Weights/Helping-Kids-Eat-Less-Sodium.aspx>)
- A Salty Situation (Health Canada)  
(<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/food-nutrition/infographic-salty-situation.html>)

## Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Nutrition and Gastroenterology Committee
- Public Education Advisory Committee



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