



Healthy eating for young toddlers

The second year is an exciting and busy time for children, as they begin to explore life independently. This is the time to encourage your child to enjoy family meals and try a wide variety of foods and tastes.

What do toddlers need to eat?

Toddlers should be served the same foods as the whole family, with a variety of textures and flavours for balanced nutrition. Offer a variety of food from the following groups:

- fruit and vegetables
- breads and cereals
- meat, fish, chicken, eggs and legumes
- full cream milk, cheese and yoghurt.

Children will learn to eat what the family eats if they are given the same food and encouraged to try it.

Low fat or restricted diets are not recommended for toddlers, as they may result in poor growth.

Who is in charge at mealtimes?

Eating and mealtimes are a team effort, with control being shared between parents and their children.

Children can sense how much food their bodies need and will eat enough to match this, but they can lose this natural ability to sense when they are hungry or full, if forced to over eat or finish all the food on their plate. Parents and children have different mealtime roles within the family.

The parent's job is to decide:

- which foods to offer their child
- when to offer food.

The child's job is to decide:

- whether they will eat
- how much they will eat.

My child seems to eat less than they used to

Children's eating patterns often change in the toddler years, and picky eating can be common. The world has become a new and exciting place for your toddler to explore, and food may be less important when there are so many other things to do.

There are some other reasons for these changes in eating.

Slower growth

Children do not grow as fast in their second year, which means that toddlers often need less food and have smaller appetites. The amount eaten from day to day can change dramatically.



Although this change can be worrying for parents, it is normal and does not mean your child is being difficult or is unwell.

Food refusal

Showing independence is part of normal toddler development and this often includes refusing to eat food, just to see what will happen. Refusing a food does not always mean that your child does not like it – they may just be testing to see the reaction they will get!

- Separate meals are not necessary, serve your toddler the same foods as the rest of the family.
- Offer new foods in a calm and relaxed environment.
- Try a new food with foods that you know your child already eats.
- Offer a food at several meals if it is refused the first time – it can take five to ten goes for children to accept new foods.
- Give words of encouragement such as “try it, you’ll like it”, but don’t argue or force your child to eat.
- Don’t assume your child will dislike a particular food.
- Try not to fuss if your child refuses to eat – remember that children know how much food they need.

Grazing and snacking

Many toddlers do not follow a traditional meal pattern, but prefer to have small, regular snacks instead. This grazing style suits small stomach sizes and provides a steady intake of energy to keep toddlers on the go all day. Grazing is not a problem if the snacks provided are nutritious.

As a guide, plan for your toddler to have three main meals (these may only be small) and two to three snacks per day. Try and encourage 1½- 2 hours between each meal or snack.

Some ideas for healthy and interesting snacks are:

- fresh or tinned fruit – dried fruits are sticky and high in sugar, so only offer these occasionally
- crackers with cheese or peanut butter
- cheese slices, cubes, sticks, triangles
- salsa, dip or hummus with crackers or vegetable sticks (make sure children are seated and supervised)
- fruit or plain yoghurt (can be frozen)
- raisin bread, fruit loaf or toasted English muffins
- plain biscuits, scones or pikelets
- fruit or vegetable muffins e.g. sultana, carrot, banana, zucchini or pumpkin
- rice cakes.

How can I help to make eating a positive experience?

Mealtimes should be relaxed and happy occasions. Try to:

- offer meals in a relaxed environment
- remove distractions by turning off the TV and putting toys out of reach
- seat your toddler at the table to eat with the family whenever possible, so that they learn by watching and copying others
- let your child explore food by touching – and prepare for some mess!
- let your child feed themselves and give help if needed – provide a small spoon or fork and a comfortable chair
- offer small serves to start and give more if needed
- respect your child if they tell you that they are full
- remove food after 20 minutes or so, if your child has lost interest

- give your child encouragement, and don't make a fuss if food is refused
- less healthy snacks such as chocolate, chips, sweet biscuits or ice cream should not be offered as alternatives or bribes, if food is refused. Children will quickly learn to refuse meals and snacks in preference for these foods
- be a positive role model, eat well and your child will copy you.

What should I offer my child to drink?

Toddlers should be offered all drinks in a cup. Some children may fill up on drinks, particularly sweet ones like juice, and this leaves little room for solid food. Drinking sweet drinks regularly can also increase the risk of tooth decay.

- Give food first, then drinks at mealtimes and snacks.
- Offer up to three glasses of full fat milk per day and water at other times. Reduced fat milk and dairy products can be offered to children over two years of age. Skim milk and dairy products are not suitable for children under five.
- Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drink are not needed for a healthy diet and are not recommended.

When should I worry about eating?

Many parents worry about their child's eating at some stage, particularly in younger children when food intake and appetite appear to be different everyday. Remember that this is normal toddler eating behavior. However you should ask for professional help if:

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

Important tips for toddler eating

- Toddlers' appetites and food intake can vary daily.
- Toddlers need small meals and regular snacks.
- Encourage your child to eat meals with the family.
- Let them tell you they are full, don't force a child to finish all food on the plate.
- Parents decide what food to offer and when to offer it.
- Children decide whether they will eat and how much they will eat.
- Don't assume that your child will dislike a food before they try it.
- New foods may be rejected at first – be patient and keep offering, it can take five to ten attempts.
- Let children feed themselves; be on hand if help is needed.
- Offer all drinks in a cup.
- Sweet drinks such as fruit juice, cordial and soft drink are not necessary.
- Keep mealtimes relaxed and fun.
- Young children should always be seated and supervised when eating.
- Avoid small hard foods such as nuts and hard lollies.
- For details about safe food handling at home visit the 'food safety' website at www.foodsafety.vic.gov.au

For more information about child nutrition visit:
www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au