



Healthy eating in the primary school years

School age is the time that children start to enjoy busy social lives, have pocket money and begin to help choose their own lifestyle. Children of this age learn quickly and are also influenced by their friends and popular trends. This is the perfect time to learn about the importance of healthy food and activity.

The early and middle primary years are ones of slow and steady physical growth. Very low fat or restricted diets are not recommended – a healthy balanced approach to eating and activity is suggested for all children.

Food needs

Children need a wide variety of foods for a well balanced diet. Offer a range of foods from the following groups:

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

During the primary school years, children move to a more traditional eating pattern of three main meals per day. For busy and active children a 'top up' in between main meals is still important to help keep them alert and on the go. A healthy snack at recess and after school is usually needed. Your child's activity levels influence the amount of food needed.

Exercise and activity

Physical activity is an important part of good health. Being active everyday can help children to maintain a healthy weight, help protect against diseases in later life, improve concentration and boost their self-esteem and confidence. At least one hour of activity per day is recommended.

Encourage your child to do something active each day, play a game or be involved in a sport.

Try to:

- restrict the amount of TV, computer and other screen games to two hours per day
- involve your child in physical activities around the home, such as gardening, washing the car or house cleaning
- encourage your child to fill free time with things like skipping, playing ball or jumping on a trampoline, these simple things count as activity
- do something physical and active together, walk the dog, throw a Frisbee, play in the park, go bush walking
- walk instead of taking the car, where possible, for example, walk to school
- support your child's sporting efforts – watch them play, help them practice and praise them whether they win or lose.

Remember to be a role model for your child and be active in your own daily life.

Family mealtimes

Sitting down to eat as a family is a great chance to spend time together. Take time to eat together and relax at mealtimes, even if only a few times during the week or at weekends. Try a late breakfast or lunch on the weekend with all the family together.



At mealtimes:

- encourage talking and sharing of daytime activities
- avoid distractions such as TV, radio or the telephone
- let your child decide when they are full, don't argue about food
- encourage children to help with preparing meals and shopping
- discuss some simple nutrition messages such as 'milk helps keep your teeth and bones strong'.

Breakfast

It is important to encourage children to eat breakfast. A good night's sleep followed by breakfast in the morning helps children stay active and concentrate at school. It also means your child is less likely to get too hungry during the morning. Be a positive role model and let your child see you eat breakfast. Some great starters for the whole family include:

- a bowl of breakfast cereal or porridge with milk
- slices of toast or fruit bread with spread
- fresh or stewed fruit and yoghurt.

School lunches

Packed lunches from home are a great way for your child to learn about healthy food and help with preparation. Packaging can sometimes be tricky for little fingers – make sure that your child is able to unwrap the food in their lunch box.

Some lunch box ideas:

- Fresh or tinned fruit. Dried fruit is sticky and high in sugar, so only offer these occasionally, or as part of a meal.
- Try vegetable sticks with dips or a small container with mixed vegetables such as cherry tomatoes, carrot sticks, snow peas or cucumber.
- Include a variety of breads and fillings, especially if children begin to lose interest in sandwiches. Try bread rolls, flat bread, foccacias, crispbread, rice or corn cakes. Try fillings such as vegemite, peanut butter, cheese, tuna, egg, cold lean meats, baked beans, grated carrot, avocado and lettuce.
- Include a small drink of milk or water

(freeze overnight) wrapped in a cloth in the lunch box. Fruit yoghurts should be kept cool in an insulated lunch box.

- Cheese and biscuits – either prepackaged or your own homemade version.
- Fruit muffins or cakes are a great way to include more fruit and vegetables. Try sultana, carrot, zucchini, banana or pumpkin.

School canteens and 'sometimes' foods

Many schools have canteens, and most children will use them at some time. However, without some help your child may choose food that is high in energy, but low in nutrients, and often more expensive than food brought from home. It is best to limit the amount of money children are given to spend at school (or at shops on the way home). While the occasional lollies, chips and take away foods do no harm, if eaten too often this may result in:

- poor intake of nourishing foods
- high energy intake and the risk of becoming overweight
- high cost compared to homemade snacks and lunches
- increased risk of tooth decay
- missed opportunity to teach your child about food preparation and planning.

Peer pressure to eat particular 'popular' foods at this age is strong—children can be influenced by TV ads and marketing of food products. Let your child enjoy these foods from time to time, at parties or special events.

Drinks

Active children need plenty of fluids. Encourage children to have water as their main drink. Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drink are not needed for a healthy diet and are not recommended.

Some children may drink less milk as they get older; this is not usually a problem if they are eating a range of dairy foods as well. Three serves of dairy

food are needed each day to provide enough calcium for bone development; one serve equals a glass of milk, a tub of yoghurt or two slices of cheese.

Reduced fat and skim milk or dairy products are both suitable for school aged children, but not for infants.

Important tips for school aged children

- Children need a variety of different foods each day.
- Snacks are an important part of a healthy diet for active children.
- Make snacks nutritious, not just high in energy.
- Encourage physical activities for the whole family.
- Plan to share meals as a family and enjoy talking and sharing the days happenings at mealtimes.
- Let children tell you when they are full.
- Take lunch from home or buy nutritious food from the canteen.
- Encourage children to drink plain water.
- Sweet drinks such as fruit juice, sports drinks, cordial and soft drink are not necessary.
- Let children help with food preparation and meal planning.

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