

Making Healthy Food Choices

How can you ensure that your child is well nourished? Here are some guiding principles to keep in mind when planning and preparing meals for the family, based on recommendations from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Variety

Your child should consume a variety of foods from the five major food groups. Each food group supplies important nutrients, including vitamins and minerals.



These five groups and typical minimum servings are:

- **Vegetables:** 3-5 servings per day. A serving may consist of 1 cup of raw leafy vegetables, 3/4 cup of vegetable juice, or 1/2 cup of other vegetables, chopped raw or cooked.
- **Fruits:** 2-4 servings per day. A serving may consist of 1/2 cup of sliced fruit, 3/4 cup of fruit juice, or a medium-size whole fruit, like an apple, banana, or pear.
- **Bread, cereal, or pasta:** 6-11 servings per day. Each serving should equal 1 slice of bread, 1/2 cup of rice or pasta, or 1 ounce of cereal.
- **Protein foods:** 2-3 servings of 2-3 ounces of cooked lean meat, poultry, or fish per day. A serving in this group may also consist of 1/2 cup of cooked dry beans, one egg, or 2 tablespoons of peanut butter for each ounce of lean meat.
- **Dairy products:** 2-3 servings per day of 1 cup of low-fat milk or yogurt, or 1 1/2 ounces of natural cheese.

Fiber

Fiber (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Kids-Need-Fiber-Heres-Why-and-How.aspx>) is a carbohydrate component of plant foods that is usually un-digestible. It is found in foods like fruits, vegetables (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/How-to-Get-Your-Child-to-Eat-More-Fruits-and-Veggies.aspx>), whole-grain breads, cereals, brown rice, beans, seeds, and nuts.

- **In adults:** Increased fiber has been linked with a reduction of chronic gastrointestinal problems, including colon cancer, irritable bowel syndrome, and diverticulitis.
- **In children:** Fiber's only proven benefit is its ability to ease constipation (</English/health-issues/conditions/abdominal/Pages/Constipation.aspx>)—providing bulk that can promote regular frequency of bowel movements, soften the stools, and decrease the time it takes food to travel through the intestines. However, since food preferences and eating habits may be established early in life, and since high-fiber foods contain other nutrients, parents should include these foods in children's daily diets. See *Kids Need Fiber: Here's Why and How* (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Kids-Need-Fiber-Heres-Why-and-How.aspx>).

Protein

Your child requires protein for the proper growth and functioning of his body, including building new tissues and producing antibodies that help battle infections. Without essential amino acids (the building blocks of protein (</English/ages-stages/teen/nutrition/Pages/Protein-for-the-Teen-Athlete.aspx>)), children would be much more susceptible to serious diseases.

Protein-rich plants (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Plant-Based-Diets.aspx>)—such as dried beans and peas (legumes), grains, seeds, and nuts—can be used as valuable sources of protein. Other protein-rich foods include meat, fish, milk, yogurt, cheese, and eggs. These animal products contain high-quality protein and a full array of amino acids.

Bear in mind, however, that red meat and shellfish are not only rich in protein and an important source of iron but are high in fat and cholesterol as well. Thus, your child should consume them only in moderate amounts. Select lean cuts of meat and trim the fat before cooking. Likewise, remove skin from poultry before serving.

Fat

Humans cannot live without fats. They are a concentrated source of energy, providing essential fatty acids that are necessary for a variety of bodily processes (metabolism, blood clotting, and vitamin absorption).

However, high fat intake—particularly a diet high in saturated fats—can cause problems. Saturated fats are usually solid at room temperatures and are found in fatty meats (such as beef, pork, ham, veal, and lamb) and many dairy products (whole milk, cheese, and ice cream). They can contribute to the buildup of atherosclerotic plaques and lead to coronary artery disease later in life. A diet rich in saturated fats also can increase blood cholesterol, particularly in people who have inherited a tendency toward high cholesterol levels (</English/ages-stages/gradeschool/nutrition/Pages/How-to-Reduce-Fat-and-Cholesterol-in-Your-Childs-Diet.aspx>).

- **After age two:** Children should be served foods that are lower in fat and saturated fats. Chances are that your child's favorite foods are higher in fat than is desirable. Prudent eating means relying more on low-fat, low-cholesterol foods like poultry, fish, and lean meat (broiled, baked, or roasted; not fried), soft margarine (instead of butter), low-fat dairy products, and low-saturated-fat oils from vegetables, while limiting egg consumption.

As a general guideline, fats should make up less than 30% of the calories in your child's diet, with no more than about 1/3 or less of those fat calories coming from saturated fat, and the remainder from unsaturated (that is, polyunsaturated or monounsaturated) fats, which are liquid at room temperature and include vegetable oils like corn, safflower, sunflower, soybean, and olive.

Some parents find the information about various types of fat confusing. In general, oils and fats derived from animal origin are saturated. The simplest place to start is merely to reduce the amount of fatty foods of all types in your family's diet. See *How to Reduce Fat and Cholesterol in Your Child's Diet* (</English/ages-stages/gradeschool/nutrition/Pages/How-to-Reduce-Fat-and-Cholesterol-in-Your-Childs-Diet.aspx>).

Sugar

Keep your child's sugar consumption at moderate levels. Sugar has plenty of calories, but dietitians often call them empty calories because they have very little additional nutritional value. Even so, many children consume sugar in great quantities, usually at the expense of healthier foods—that is, when children drink sodas, they are usually leaving the milk in the refrigerator; when they eat a brownie, they may be overlooking the bowl of fruit, a good source of complex carbohydrates, on the kitchen table.

Salt

Table salt, or sodium chloride, may improve the taste of certain foods. However, researchers have found a relationship between dietary salt and high blood pressure in some individuals and population groups.

- High blood pressure (</English/health-issues/conditions/heart/Pages/High-Blood-Pressure-in-Children.aspx>) afflicts about 25% of adult Americans and contributes to heart attacks and strokes.

The habit of using extra salt is an acquired one. Thus, as much as possible, serve your child foods low in salt. In the kitchen, minimize the amount of salt you add to food during its preparation, using herbs, spices, or lemon juice instead. Take the salt shaker off the dinner table, or at least limit its use by your family.

Because of the preservative properties of salt, processed foods often contain large amounts of it. Salt-rich foods may include processed cheese, instant puddings, canned vegetables, canned soups, hot dogs, cottage cheese, salad dressings, pickles, and potato chips and other snacks.

Additional Information from HealthyChildren.org:

- [Changes to the Nutrition Facts Label: What Parents Need to Know \(/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Front-of-Package-Nutrition-Labels.aspx\)](/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Front-of-Package-Nutrition-Labels.aspx)
- [Kids Need Fiber: Here's Why and How \(/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Kids-Need-Fiber-Heres-Why-and-How.aspx\)](/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Kids-Need-Fiber-Heres-Why-and-How.aspx)
- [How to Get Your Child to Eat More Fruits and Veggies \(/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/How-to-Get-Your-Child-to-Eat-More-Fruits-and-Veggies.aspx\)](/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/How-to-Get-Your-Child-to-Eat-More-Fruits-and-Veggies.aspx)
- [Heart Disease: Reduce Your Child's Risk \(/English/health-issues/conditions/heart/Pages/Heart-Disease.aspx\)](/English/health-issues/conditions/heart/Pages/Heart-Disease.aspx)
- [Plant-Based Diets: Are They Good for Kids? \(/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Plant-Based-Diets.aspx\)](/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Plant-Based-Diets.aspx)

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