

## Patient Talk!



The International Council of Nurses  
Informed Patient Project

# Childhood Nutrition

## The Preschool Years

Preschoolers often insist on a certain food one day and reject it the next. Despite these ups and downs, they do look for security and structure. Steps that you can take to improve your child's nutrition and encourage smart eating habits include:

- Having regular family meals
- Serving a variety of healthy foods and snacks
- Being a role model by eating healthy yourself
- Avoiding battles over food
- Involving children in the preparation of meals

Source: [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

## Energy and nutrient requirements

Preschool children have high-energy requirements for their size because they are growing and active. To meet this demand, your child should eat small and frequent meals of foods high in energy and rich in nutrients. Protein, calcium, iron and vitamins A and D are necessary. Choose a wide assortment of foods from the main food groups, and let your child experiment with different textures and flavours. Skimmed milk is usually not suitable for children under five. If you are planning a vegetarian diet, talk to your health care professional.

## What about vitamin and mineral supplements?

Studies have found that a lack of zinc, iron, vitamin B and protein in the first three years can cause behavioural problems in later years. An early start in proper nutrition can help with long-lasting wellness and vitality. In some circumstances, supplements, particularly of vitamins A, C and D, may be prescribed. Your dietician or doctor can provide guidance on the type, amount and

duration. Like medications, supplements should be kept out of your children's reach.

## Common diet-related concerns

**Constipation** can be dealt with by gradually increasing the amount of fibre and liquids in your child's diet. Vegetables, fruits and wholemeal bread are high-fibre foods popular among children. Encourage your child to drink water.

**Toddler diarrhoea** may be linked to low fat diets, high fibre diets and/or excessive sweet drinks. Give small frequent meals and snacks from the main food groups. Most children grow out of the problem between two and four years of age.

**Choking** is the greatest risk in children under three. Sausages, grapes, hard pieces of candy and vegetables, and very sticky foods can cause choking. Foods should be cut in narrow, length-wise pieces. Supervising your children and encouraging them to sit quietly when eating can prevent choking.

**Tooth cavities** are caused by a steady food supply of acid-producing bacteria in mouth. Sugars found in sweets and starches feed the bacteria. Limiting sweet sticky foods and ensuring children brush their teeth regularly can promote dental health.

## School-Aged Children

At this stage your child is on the go! Meals are often eaten away from home and snacks become an important part of your child's diet. Although your child thrives on accomplishment, you might notice that he or she also enjoys less active pursuits, like watching television or playing video games.

Balancing your child's activities with his or her food needs can be challenging.

### **Energy and nutrient requirements**

Children grow according to their own patterns. Typically, they have high-energy requirements for their size. They often have growth spurts during which they get thinner even though their appetite increases. Regular meals and healthy snacks should include carbohydrate-rich foods, fruits and vegetables, dairy products, lean meats, fish, eggs, legumes and nuts. Children under 16 should avoid eating shark, marlin and swordfish because of the relatively high levels of mercury that these fish contain.

### **Iron deficiency**

The rapid growth periods of children place them at high risk for iron-deficiency anaemia. If left untreated, iron-deficiency may lead to behavioural or learning problems. If you recognise the symptoms listed below in your child, talk to your medical doctor. He or she can diagnose whether your child is at risk or already has an iron deficiency.

- Fatigue and weakness
- Pale skin and mucous membranes
- Irritability
- Decreased appetite
- Dizziness or a feeling of being light-headed

Source: [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

### **Overweight or obesity**

The number of overweight and obese children is increasing. Evidence shows that irregular family eating patterns, high intakes of fat and processed foods and little physical activity lead to overweight and obesity in childhood. If your child is overweight, he or she should not be on a restrictive diet. Rather, a lifestyle of healthy eating and activity is most successful. Include the whole family in healthy lifestyle changes. Public health authorities recommend that children have at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity every day. Being overweight because of a medical condition is rare, but check with your health care professional if concerned.

**There is no relationship between snacking and being overweight in childhood. The important factor is to make sensible choices in the context of a healthy, active lifestyle.**

**For more information on childhood nutrition, consult the following sites:**

- The European Food Information Council. [www.eufic.org](http://www.eufic.org)
- Health Canada. Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion.  
*Nutrition for Preschoolers:* [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/onpp-bppn/food\\_guide\\_preschoolers\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/onpp-bppn/food_guide_preschoolers_e.html)  
*Nutrition for Children 6-12 years:* [http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/onpp-bppn/focus\\_child\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/onpp-bppn/focus_child_e.html)
- British Nutrition Foundation. [www.nutrition.org.uk](http://www.nutrition.org.uk)
- American Dietetic Association. *Healthy Habits for Healthy Kids.* [www.eatright.org/Public/index\\_16684.cfm](http://www.eatright.org/Public/index_16684.cfm)
- Scottish Executive. *Scottish Nutrient Standards for School Lunches.* [www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/niss-00.asp](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/niss-00.asp)