



Helping Your 1 to 3 Year Old Toddler Eat Well

You can help your child eat well and share the responsibility with your 1 to 3 year old toddler. Here are some tips for healthy and enjoyable meals.

- You decide which foods to offer.
- Let your baby decide how much and whether to eat.
- Offer food at the same times each day.
- Sit down and eat with your child. Babies and children enjoy company while eating. You are their best role model.

Parents decide what and when food is served

What food is served – Choose a variety of healthy foods for your family.

- Aim for all 4 food groups at meals. Aim for 2 food groups at snacks. The 4 food groups are:
 1. **Vegetables and Fruit** including dark green and orange vegetables
 2. **Grain Products** including whole grain breads, cereals, tortillas, roti, pasta, crackers, quinoa, barley, wild and brown rice
 3. **Milk and Alternatives** include milk and yogurt, cheese, soup, pudding made with milk, and breast milk (offer breast milk after a meal). Offer toddlers under 2 years of age whole milk to drink. Lower fat milks, fortified soy beverages, and rice drinks are not recommended for children before 2 years of age.
 4. **Meat and Alternatives** such as meat, fish, poultry, lentils and beans, peanut or nut butters, tofu and eggs

For more information, see HealthLink BC File [#69e Meal and Snack Ideas for Your One to Three-Year-Old Toddler](#) and [Toddler's First Steps](#).

- Let your child choose foods within a food group such as either bread or crackers, or apple or kiwi fruit.
- Serve a new food along with food your child likes to eat.
- Even if your child refuses to eat a new food, you can continue to offer it at times in positive ways and without pressure.
- Sometimes toddlers would rather drink milk than eat solid foods. But drinking too much milk fills up your child's stomach and leaves little room for solid foods. Children who drink too much milk may not get enough iron, and they may become iron deficient. If your child is no longer breastfeeding, offer 500 mL (2 cups) of milk each day.
- Limit juice to 125-175 mL (1/2-3/4 cup) per day.

When food is served – Young children need a routine for meals and snacks.

- Serve meals and snacks every 2 to 3 hours.
- Offer water between eating times.
- Make mealtime a pleasant family time – turn off the television and talk about the day's activities. Enjoy meals together as a family or have at least one adult sit down to eat and talk with your child.
- Children often take longer to eat than adults. Do not rush them.
- Toddlers who are full can leave the table to enjoy a book or toy, while the rest of the family finishes eating.

Children decide whether and how much to eat

Whether to eat – Occasionally, it is okay for a child not to eat a meal or snack. Saying no to food is a way of having choice and independence. Do

not force a child to eat or punish a child for not eating.

- Children may not want to eat if they are tired, upset or excited. Plan quiet times before eating.
- Do not use dessert as a reward for eating the rest of the meal.
- Comfort your child with love and attention instead of food.

How much to eat – Let your child tell you when he or she is full. Sometimes, children will be hungry and eat a lot. At other times, they will not eat very much.

- Serve small amounts of food on small plates.
- Offer more food if your child finishes the portion.
- Do not pressure your child to finish a drink or food.

Helpful tips

If your child refuses to eat:

A skipped meal will not harm a healthy child. Remove uneaten food without comment. Do not force your child to eat. Offer a healthy snack in a couple of hours.

If your child will not try new foods:

Continue to offer new foods and foods your child has refused in the past. Children may need to see and touch a food many times before trying it. Do not force your child to try new foods.

If your child will eat only one food:

This is called a ‘food jag’. Allow your child to eat what she wants if the food is healthy. If the food is not a healthy choice, limit how often you offer it. ‘Food jags’ rarely last long. You can continue to offer other foods at snack and mealtimes.

If your child plays with food:

Children learn by touching – give your child time to explore food. Learning to use utensils also takes time. Plan time to sit and eat slowly with your child. Expect a mess – it is part of learning how to eat.

If your child will only eat certain foods:

Offer a variety of healthy foods but do not pressure your child. If you pay attention to picky eating, this makes it more likely to continue.

If your child will not eat vegetables:

You can continue to offer vegetables. Children often prefer the bright colours and crisp textures of raw vegetables. Shred raw vegetables or slice them into narrow strips. You can also offer fruit, which provides similar nutrients to vegetables.

If your child will not eat what is served and asks you to prepare something else:

Do not prepare separate meals for your child. Be supportive but set limits. Include at least one food that your child likes to eat for each meal. Offer a healthy snack in a couple of hours.

If your child eats only a few bites of dinner and then wants dessert:

Offer healthy desserts such as fruit or milk pudding. Put all of the healthy choices on the table, and let your child decide what to eat first. If she is hungry, she will likely eat the main meal too. Limit desserts such as cakes, pastries, cookies, and ice cream.

By offering healthy food choices and sharing the responsibility for eating, mealtimes will be more positive and pleasant. Most children will:

- learn to eat a variety of healthy foods,
- eat what they need to grow well, and
- be more likely to have a healthy weight and positive body image.

For more information, contact your community nutritionist, or call 8-1-1 to speak to a registered dietitian.

For more HealthLink BC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles/index.stm or your local public health unit.

Click on www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** for non-emergency health information and services in B.C.

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