



Helping Your Toddler to Eat Well

Sharing the Responsibility with Your One to Three-Year-Old

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, bagels, muffins, tortillas, roti, pasta, crackers and brown rice
 3. **Milk and Alternatives** such as whole milk and yogurt, cheese, soup and pudding made with whole milk, and breast milk (offer breast milk after a meal). Lower fat milks, fortified soy beverages and rice drinks are not recommended for children before two 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 Files [#69e Meal and Snack Ideas for Your One to Three-Year-Old Toddler](#), and [Toddler's First Steps](#).

- Let toddlers choose within a food group like 'bread or crackers,' '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, continue to offer it occasionally in positive ways, without pressure.
- Drinking too much juice, milk or other drinks can decrease your child's appetite for food. Limit juice to 125-200 mL (1/2-3/4 cup) per day. A toddler who is not breastfed needs to drink 500 mL (2 cups) of milk each day.



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

- Serve meals and snacks every two to three 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 toddler.
- 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.
- Toddlers often ask for the same food day after day. Be patient, as this will not last long.
- 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 toddlers develop their own sense of when they are full. Sometimes, children will be hungry and eat a lot. At other times, they will not eat very much.

- Serve small amounts on small plates.
- Offer more food if the portion is finished.

- Do not pressure a toddler 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 food jag. Allow your child to eat what she wants if the food is healthy. You can continue to offer other foods at snack and mealtimes. Food jags rarely last long. If the food is not a healthy food, limit how often it is offered.

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. Paying attention to picky eating reinforces the behaviour.

If your child will not eat vegetables:

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. Offer fruit, which provides similar nutrients to those found in 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. Include at least one food that your child likes to eat for each meal. Be supportive, but set limits. Offer a healthy snack in a couple of hours.

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

If the rest of the family is offered dessert, offer it to your child as well. Offer healthy desserts such as fruit or milk pudding. 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 pleasant, and most children will:

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

Questions about:

- Food allergies
- Vitamin and mineral supplements
- Your child's growth or weight
- Vegetarian eating
- Meeting your child's iron needs
- Other food-related issues
- Books to read

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**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.

For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call 7-1-1 in B.C.

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