



Helping Your 1 to 3 Year Old Child Eat Well

As a parent or caregiver, you play an important role in helping your child build healthy eating habits and skills. Healthy eating is about more than just what we eat. It is also about how we eat.

You and your child have a special relationship when it comes to feeding and eating. You each have a different role. Your role is to decide what foods to offer, when to offer them and where to offer them. Your child's role is to decide whether to eat, what to eat from the choices provided and how much to eat. Respecting this feeding relationship allows mealtimes to be more enjoyable and your child can focus on learning to eat well.

What foods do I offer my child?

Offer your child the same healthy foods that you and the rest of your family enjoy. Give your child foods with different flavours and textures. Include a variety of:

- Vegetables and fruit
- Whole grain foods such as whole grain pasta and bread, oats, barley and quinoa
- Protein foods such as meat, fish, poultry, dried beans, peas, lentils, nut and seed butters, tofu, eggs, milk, yogurt, cheese and fortified soy beverage

Eating iron-rich foods helps prevent iron deficiency and supports growth and brain development. Foods high in iron include meat, fish, poultry, iron-fortified infant cereals, eggs, tofu, dried beans, peas and lentils. Offer your child these foods at every meal.

Make sure that the foods you offer are prepared with little or no added salt or sugar. Include foods that are higher in healthy fats like salmon, avocado and nut butters.

What do I offer my child to drink?

You can continue to offer your child breastmilk until they are 2 years of age or older.

Plain cow's milk and fortified soy beverage are nutritious drinks that provide calcium, vitamin D and protein for growing children.

- Offer 500 mL of pasteurized whole cow's milk (3.25% Milk Fat) each day
- When your child is 2 years old, you can start to offer lower fat milk options such as skim, 1%, or 2%. You can also give plain fortified soy beverage
- Offer no more than 750 mL (3 cups) of milk and soy beverage per day so that your child has room for a variety of healthy foods, including iron rich foods
- Offer milk or soy beverage (for children over 2 years) with meals and snacks only

If your child doesn't drink whole cow's milk or soy beverage, speak to your health care provider or a registered dietitian about what you can offer instead.

Rice, potato, almond, coconut, oat and hemp beverages are low in protein and fat and do not support the growth of young children.

Offer water between meals and snacks. Water is the best beverage when your child is thirsty.

Use an open cup instead of a "sippy" cup or bottle when you give your child a drink. An open cup will help your child learn to drink. It also lowers the risk of tooth decay.

Children do not need sugary drinks such as pop, sports drinks, fruit juice, fruit beverages and fruit flavored drinks made from powders or crystals. Sugary drinks fill up your child's stomach, taking the place of healthier foods. All fruit juice, including 100% fruit juice, is high in sugar and low in fibre. Offer your child whole fruit instead.

When should I serve food to my child?

Offer your child 3 small meals and 2 to 3 snacks, spaced about 2 to 3 hours apart. Try to serve meals

and snacks at about the same time every day. A regular routine of meals and snacks can help your child develop healthy eating habits.

How much food does my child need?

Every child is different and the amount of food they need varies based on their age, activity level, growth rate and appetite. It's normal for your child's appetite to vary from day to day. Your child's appetite can also be affected by their mood, their health, the time of day and the food offered.

Start by offering small amounts of food at meals and snacks and let them ask for more.

What can I do to help my child eat well?

Sit and eat with your child.

You are your child's best role model. Your child will learn healthy eating habits by watching you. Always supervise your child while eating.

Offer new foods many times.

Offer new foods often and serve them with at least 1 food that your child eats well. Children often need to see, smell and touch a food many times before tasting it. Your child may need to taste a food many times before they eat it. Continue to offer new foods and include foods your child has refused in the past.

Give your child enough time to eat.

Your child may take longer to eat than you. Give them time to finish eating. If your child shows you that they are done eating by playing with the food, let them leave the table to enjoy a book or a toy.

Let your child feed themselves.

Letting your child self-feed is an important part of learning how to eat. Young children learn by touching, smelling, tasting and looking at foods. Learning to use a spoon and fork takes time. Making a mess is also part of learning how to eat.

Keep mealtimes calm and reduce distractions.

Turn off the TV, cell phones, tablets and computers to allow your child to focus on eating and keep the family meal pleasant. This will also help you focus on enjoying time together and not on what or how much your child eats.

Try offering the same food in different ways.

Be patient. Offer your child foods made in different ways. Roasted vegetables, cut-up vegetables in soups or pasta sauces and smoothies made with whole fruits and vegetables are tasty ways to offer more variety. If your child likes vegetables cooked a certain way, give them other vegetables made that same way.

What if my child doesn't want to eat?

If your child is growing well, a skipped meal every once in a while is not a problem. If you have questions about your child's growth, appetite or intake, talk to your health care provider or a registered dietitian.

If your child doesn't want to eat a food, remove the food and wait until the next meal or snack to feed to them again. Making a different meal for your child will not help them become a healthy eater.

Sometimes young children only want to eat the same foods over and over again. This is normal and may last for a few weeks or months. If the "favourite" food is healthy, continue to offer it along with a variety of other healthy foods. If the "favourite" food is a less healthy option, give it to your child less often.

Using dessert or a favourite food as a reward for eating isn't needed. Do not pressure or bribe your child to eat. Trust your child's appetite to guide them on whether to eat and how much.

For More Information

For more information on meal and snack ideas and feeding your child, see:

- [HealthLinkBC File #69e Meal and Snack Ideas for Your 1 to 3 Year Old Child](#)
- Toddler's First Steps at www.healthlinkbc.ca/toddlers-first-steps

For more nutrition information, call **8-1-1** to speak with a registered dietitian.