

Healthy eating and play for kindergarten children (3-5 YEARS)



Nutrition

Children's habits are influenced by family life, other children and messages from television. Children can learn to make healthy food, activity and lifestyle choices with help from families and carers.

Eating patterns

Life takes on a new routine for kindergarten children. Food is needed through the day to keep children growing, healthy and active. Offer regular meals and snacks, let your child eat according to their appetite, and enjoy eating together. Help your child learn about signs of hunger and fullness. End the meal if your child is tired, irritable or unwell.

Kindergarten children need a range of foods from the following groups:

- vegetables and legumes/beans
- fruits
- grains and cereals
- meat, fish, chicken, eggs, legumes
- milk, cheese and yoghurt or alternatives; mostly reduced fat

Processed foods with high levels of fat, sugar and/or salt (e.g. cakes, biscuits, chips, fried foods) are not recommended for children. Eating these foods is linked with obesity, tooth decay and poor eating habits in the future.

Growth

Children grow more slowly during the kindergarten years. Low fat or restricted diets are usually not needed because children's energy and nutrient needs are high. Try to:

- develop healthy eating habits for the whole family
- encourage active free play several times every day (at least one hour, up to several hours throughout the day is recommended)

Appetite

Kindergarten children can usually sense how much food their bodies need and eat enough to match this – but they can lose this natural ability if forced to eat. Encouraging children to 'clean the plate' or giving sweets as a reward can lead to longer-term problems of overeating.

Offer your child small serves to start and give more if they are still hungry. Meal sizes and overall food intake can vary day-to-day depending on your child's activity levels and appetite.

Help children to learn about their body's hunger cues.

Active play

Encourage kindergarten children to play actively every day. Active play helps children to grow and develop, improves focus, and boosts confidence and self-esteem. It can also help protect against diseases in later life.

Active play ensures children get the chances to improve movement skills. Playing outside rather than inside offers more opportunities for the body to move. All opportunities to walk, run, climb, push, pull, spin and dance creatively count.

Creative play includes making up games or activities and imitating others. To encourage creative active play provide items such as hula-hoops, cardboard boxes, cushions, balls and buckets. Join in games with your children often.

As a family try to:

- plan something physical and active together as a family on a weekly basis. Find a park or play area that you can walk or ride to in your local area
- invite other children to play outdoors with your child
- if time and money permit, see if there are any activity classes for pre-schoolers in your area such as swimming, gymnastics, dance or ball play. Involve your child in active hobbies such as gymnastics, dance, swimming, dancing or junior sports
- remember to be an active role model for your child in your own daily life

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Reduce inactive time

By kindergarten age, strollers are not needed. Allow a little more time to walk whenever possible.

- limit the amount of screen time (television, computers, electronic games, iPads and phones) for your child to no more than one hour per day
- limit the time your child spends sitting or lying still, except during sleep
- offer children active options following some inactive time

Family mealtimes

Eating as a family when you can is a great chance to spend time together to talk about the day's activities and events. Take time to eat together and relax at mealtimes and:

- encourage talking and sharing of daytime activities
- avoid distractions such as TV, radio or the telephone
- let your child decide when they are full, don't argue about food
- discuss some simple nutrition messages such as 'milk helps keep your teeth and bones strong'

Meals for kindergarten

Children continue to learn new skills and ideas about food when eating away from home. They can be involved in preparing their lunch box and helping their carers make healthy snacks and lunches. Making meals together can also be an educational and fun activity.

Suggestions include:

- a sandwich, fresh fruit or vegetable, and a tub of yoghurt
- lean meat and salad in pita bread, with tinned fruit and plain milk
- milk, yoghurt and water can be frozen in hot weather

Healthy snacks

Snacks are an important part of your child's day. What children eat is more important than when they eat. As a guide, plan for your child to have three main meals and 2-3 snacks per day. Try to encourage at least two hours between each meal and snack. Offer snacks that include fruits, milk products and whole grain cereals.

'Extra' foods

By this age children are starting to enjoy the social aspects of food. Your child will be eating away from home more, going to parties, etc. While occasional lollies, chips and take away foods do no harm, if eaten too often they can result in less appetite for healthy foods and higher risks of overweight, tooth decay and constipation.

Enjoy these foods from time to time, at parties with friends or on special occasions with the rest of the family.

Healthy drinks

Active children need plenty of fluids. Encourage children to have water as their main drink.

- offer up to three small cups of reduced fat milk each day and water at other times
- around three cups of milk and dairy products is a good amount each day. If your child has more than this, it can spoil their appetite for other foods like meats, fruit and vegetables
- calcium-enriched soy and other plant-based milks (e.g., rice, oat, almond) can be used as long as there are other foods such as meat, lentils, and eggs in the diet
- sweet drinks such as juice, cordial, soft drink, sports drinks and flavoured water are not needed. Unpasteurised milks, caffeinated drinks, tea, coffee and herbal drinks are all not recommended for children

Important tips for kindergarten children

- encourage healthy eating for everyone in the family and enjoy meals and activities together
- help children learn about when they are full or hungry
- limit screen time to one hour each day
- encourage active free play several times every day
- encourage water as the main drink; Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drink are not necessary
- seek advice from your GP or maternal and child health nurse if worried about your child's growth, appetite or development

Nutrition

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