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Dietary Guidelines for Children Age Two to Five

This publication discusses the dietary needs and guidelines for young children.

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If you have children or care for children who are between two and five years of age, you play a significant role in their health. The quality of care you provide will benefit the children within your care now and in the future. To provide adequate food choices for children, you need to understand what foods help children grow and develop.

Most of us know that good health and proper nutrition are important. The first step in helping children learn good nutritional habits is to practice them daily yourself. Usually when children are well cared for when they are young they will want to take good care of themselves as they grow older.

Look at the following guidelines and see if you keep them in mind while caring for your children age two to five.

Offer a variety of foods

Prepare a variety of foods daily in adequate amounts from the following food groups.

- Bread, cereal, rice and pasta
- Vegetables
- Fruits
- Milk, yogurt and cheese
- Meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, and eggs

No single food can supply all the nutrients in the amount a child needs. For example, milk supplies calcium but little iron; meat supplies iron but little calcium. For children to have a nutritious diet, you must offer a variety of foods.

Milk is an important food for children two to five years of age mainly because of its calcium content. If a child drinks about 16 to 32 ounces of milk a day there is no cause for concern. Drinking too much milk or any liquid may reduce appetite for other important foods, especially those that are rich in iron.

For preschool children who have a varied diet, vitamin supplements are not required. However if you restrict foods such as in a vegetarian diet with no eggs or dairy products consult a pediatrician about which supplements are needed and in what amounts.

Water is an important nutrient. Offer your child water several times a day. When your child is thirsty offer water instead of sugared drinks.

Any food that supplies calories and nutrients can be part of a nutritious diet. It's the content of the total diet over a day or more that counts.

Helping children to a healthy weight

Children vary enormously in the way they grow. To help your child to a healthy weight offer a variety of foods that are high in nutrients such as:

- Fruits and vegetables prepared in the fresh form or without additional fat added in preparation.
- Whole grain products
- Low-fat dairy products such as low-fat milk, cheese, and yogurt.
- Cooked lean meat, poultry, fish and cooked dry beans.

Other ways to help children maintain a healthy weight are to:

- Provide ways that children can increase their physical activity.
- Provide a special time for meals and snacks.
- Offer good food choices to your children and let them choose what foods and how much they want to eat.
- Don't use food as a reward for good behavior.
- Don't use food as a comforting device.
- Limit snacks to two times a day about two hours before a meal. Offer healthful foods as choices in place of soft drinks, candy, chips, or pastries. Examples of nutritious snack foods are:
 - Fruit and fruit juices
 - Vegetable and meat sticks
 - Yogurt
 - Toast or crackers
 - Finger sandwiches
 - Oatmeal cookies
 - Bran muffins

Don't worry if food intake is inconsistent. Children two to five years of age will not starve themselves. If, however, a severe decrease in appetite persists for more than a week, or there are signs of illness such as diarrhea or weight loss, consult your health care professional.

Offer foods low in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol

A child's goal for total fat intake, including saturated fat, depends upon the number of calories needed. An amount that provides 30 percent or less of calories is suggested for children over the age of two. For saturated fats, it is suggested that the amount provide 10 percent or less of total calories. The fats in animal products are the main sources of saturated fat in most diets, with tropical oils (coconut, palm kernel and palm oils) and hydrogenated fats providing smaller amounts. Animal products are also sources of all dietary cholesterol. Offering children less fat from animal sources will help lower the cholesterol, total fat and saturated fat in their diets. Remember that the recommendation is to limit not to restrict total fat intake. Children and adults need some fat intake. Food tips to reduce fat, saturated fat and cholesterol:

- Use fats and oils sparingly in cooking.
- Choose lean cuts of meat and trim visible fat.
- Take skin off poultry.
- Have cooked dry beans and peas instead of meat occasionally.
- Moderate the use of egg yolks and organ meats.
- Choose low-fat milk and non-fat or low-fat yogurt and cheese most of the time.
- Check labels on foods to see how much fat and saturated fat are in a serving.
- Choose liquid vegetable oils most often because they are lower in saturated fat.
- Broil, bake or boil rather than fry.

Offer a diet with plenty of vegetables, fruits, and grain products

Prepare foods that are good sources of fiber and starch, such as whole-grain breads and cereals, fruits, vegetables, and dry beans and peas. Go easy on increasing fiber in children's diets. As in adults, if fiber is increased too quickly, it can be uncomfortable. Also, children need to have calories. Too many foods with fiber can reduce the amount of food that a child will want to eat.

Invite children to have at least six servings of grain products (breads, cereals, pasta, and rice) daily. Substitute grain foods for those with large amounts of fats and sugar, but do realize that children need sufficient calories for growth and energy.

Use sugar in moderation

Tips to moderate the use of added sugar:

- Use less of all sugars and foods containing large amounts of added sugars including white sugar, brown sugar, honey, and syrups. Examples include sugared drinks, candies, cakes, and cookies.
- Read food labels for indications on sugar content. If the word sugar, sucrose, glucose, maltose, dextrose, lactose, fructose, honey, or syrup appears first, then the food contains a large amount of sugar. Also look to see how many different sugars are listed -- they can add up to be several in one product.
- Children need to snack between meals, but not only on sweets. Usually children must eat in between meals to get all of the calories and nutrients that they need daily.
- Offer fresh fruits or fruits processed without syrup or with light rather than heavy syrup.

- How often sweets are eaten is more important to the health of teeth than how much sugar is eaten. Both sugars and starches -- which break down into sugars -- can contribute to tooth decay. Children should brush their teeth and floss regularly to help prevent tooth decay. Consult a dentist or doctor about the need for supplemental fluoride, especially for children.

Use salt and sodium only in moderation

Most of us eat more salt and sodium than we need. Food tips to moderate the use of salt and sodium:

- Use salt sparingly, if at all, in cooking and at the table.
- Foods that tend to be higher in sodium include many cheeses, processed meats, most frozen dinners and entrees, packaged mixes, most canned soups and vegetables, salad dressings and condiments like soy sauce, pickles, olives, catsup and mustard.
- Sparingly offer salted snacks such as chips, crackers, pretzels and nuts.
- Check labels for the amount of sodium in foods and offer to your children those lower in sodium most of the time.

Summary

If you think these guidelines are like the guidelines for healthy Americans, you are right. The things you should be doing for your children from two to five years of age are the same types of things you should be doing for yourself. Children age two to five should be able to look to you as a model for good nutrition patterns.

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