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G98-1364 Feeding Children Ages 2 to 5

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Feeding Children Ages 2 to 5

This NebGuide defines nutritional needs and healthy eating patterns for children ages 2 to 5.

H. Darlene Martin, Extension Nutrition Specialist

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Children Grow at Their Own Rate

Children move through growth spurts throughout childhood. Usually, a child will grow about 2 1/2 inches and gain about four or five pounds each year between the ages of 2 and 5. By 15 months old, most children have developed enough fine motor skills to feed themselves without help, if allowed to do so. Appetites vary with young children as well as adults. Parents and caregivers need to help promote a healthy pattern of eating rather than using controlling techniques such as restricting food intake of heavier children or pressuring smaller children to eat more. Attitudes and habits formed during the early childhood years can help establish lifelong health habits.

Good Nutrition Can Be Achieved By Eating A Wide Variety of Foods

Children's basic nutrition needs are very similar to those of other family members, although amounts of food needed differ because of age. Offer your child a variety of foods from the basic food groups:

- Breads, cereals, rice and pasta
- Vegetables
- Fruits
- Milk, yogurt and cheese
- Meats, poultry, fish, dry beans and peas, eggs, and nuts

It is important to offer a variety of foods within each food group. For example, in the fruit group, it is better to eat an orange, a half a grapefruit, and a kiwi over a three-day period rather than eating three oranges. Over time, young children will take in adequate nutrients when offered a wide variety of healthy foods.

Different nutrients are needed for different functions in the body. Protein is needed for growth. Most of the protein in the diet is supplied by milk, meat, fish, poultry, eggs, cheese and dry beans and peas. Calcium is needed for strong bones and teeth. Dietary calcium is primarily found in milk and milk products such as cheese and yogurt and to a lesser extent in leafy green vegetables. Iron is an important mineral that comes from meat, poultry, fish, eggs, green leafy vegetables and iron-fortified breads and cereals. Iron from cereal will be absorbed better when served with a food rich in vitamin C. Citrus fruits and their juices and dark green or yellow vegetables are good sources of vitamin C and vitamin A.

Water is needed to regulate body functions in young children. As a percentage of body weight, children have more water in their bodies than adults. Children can become dehydrated more quickly than adults. Offer water to your young child several times during the day.

Fat is a necessary nutrient in a child's diet. It helps to provide extra calories and needed nutrients for active and growing children. No fat restriction should be applied to children below the age of 2 because their fast growth requires a high percentage of calories from fat. The following pattern is recommended by the American Heart Association for children over the age of 2: Saturated fatty acids – less than 10 percent of total calories; total fat – an average of no more than 30 percent of total calories; dietary cholesterol – less than 300 milligrams per day. Each of these numbers refer to an average of nutrient intake over several days. You can help your child (2 and older) develop beneficial low-fat dietary habits by offering items such as reduced fat milk, non-fat yogurt and lean meats.

Sugary foods provide few nutrients and should be limited. Chewy, sticky, sugary foods may promote tooth decay if left on the teeth. Children should be taught to properly brush their teeth daily to help reduce tooth decay.

How Do I Know My Child is Growing Properly?

A growth chart is a reliable way to tell if your child's diet is meeting body needs. These charts are available from pediatricians, public health clinics and child health agencies. Since children grow in spurts, their needs will vary. Changes in appetite may reflect these needs. Allow children to eat until they are full, regardless of how much or how little. To examine what you offer your child to eat, keep track of everything your child eats for two or three days and compare it to the Food Guide. Check to see if you are offering at least the lowest numbers of servings in each food group as well as variety within each group. If you think your child is too heavy, remember that physical activity also is needed to maintain a healthy weight. Playing games that use physical exercise is important to a growing child.

A Final Word

To promote a positive attitude toward good food habits, it is important that parents and care givers help children understand they are "good kids." What children "do" may be unacceptable at times, but who and what they "are" inside are normal, healthy and OK kids.

Fill in this chart to see if you are offering your child at least the lowest numbers of servings in each food group. (Minimum servings are indicated.)						
Milk Group (4 Servings)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Meat Group (3-5 Servings)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			
Fruit Group (2-4 Servings)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Vegetable Group (3-5 Servings)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			
Bread Group (6-11 Servings)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others Category (Minimal Servings)						

Food Guide for Young Children		
Food Group	Suggested Daily Servings	Suggested Serving Sizes
Vegetables Dark-green leafy Deep-yellow Dry beans and peas Starchy vegetables Other vegetables	3-5 servings Include all types regularly. Serve dark-green leafy and deep-yellow vegetables often. Serve cooked dry beans and peas several times a week.	1/4 cup of cooked vegetables 1/4 cup of chopped raw vegetables 1/2 cup of leafy raw vegetables such as lettuce or spinach
FRUITS Include citrus fruits or their juices regularly.	2-4 servings Choose fruits as desserts and fruit juices as beverages.	1/2 whole fruit such as an apple, banana or orange; or a melon wedge 1/2 cup of juice 1/4 cup cooked or canned fruit

		1/4 cup of raisins
BREADS, CEREALS, RICE AND PASTA	6-11 servings Include several servings of whole grain products daily.	1/2 slice of bread 1/2 roll, biscuit or muffin 4 crackers, saltines 1/4 cup cooked cereal, rice or pasta 1/3 cup ready-to-eat dry cereal 1/4 cup hot cooked cereal
MILK, YOGURT AND CHEESE	4 servings	1/2 cup of milk or yogurt 3/4 ounce of natural cheese 1 ounce of processed cheese
MEATS, POULTRY, FISH, DRY BEANS AND PEAS, EGGS AND NUTS	3-5 servings	1 ounce of cooked lean meat, poultry or fish 1/2 egg 1/2 cup cooked beans 2 tablespoons peanut butter

Tips on how to make mealtimes pleasant experiences for your young child:

- Involve your children in meal preparation. By allowing your preschooler to take part in meal preparation, you may help increase your child's interest in a new or unfamiliar food.
- Include at least one of your child's preferred foods. Offer a choice of foods. The meal should have at least one food that you know the child will select and eat.
- Offer foods with a variety of colors and textures. This will create interest and increase the number of foods your child will accept.
- Use child-size food portions. One way to consider portion sizes is to have one tablespoon of each type of food for each year of the child's age.
- Play it safe with foods that cause choking. Round cuts of hot dogs, cherries, grapes, carrot chunks, tortilla chips, peanut butter, or nuts may cause a child to choke. Simply cut hot dogs into four pieces lengthwise; cook and mash carrots; cut grapes and cherries into fourths. Don't serve peanut butter by the spoonfuls, combine it with other food items such as jelly or diced canned peaches to improve consistency. Nuts and chips should be cut finely or crushed.
- Expect and tolerate child-like table manners. Let a child be a child. Show children your own good table manners. Children are always learning from your examples.
- A comfortable eating environment is important at mealtime. Select chairs, tables, dishes and silverware suitable in structure and size for the preschooler. Providing a routine such as washing hands and talking about how the foods offered during the meal fit into the food guide pyramid help a child get ready to eat. Do not expect a young child to sit still at meals; yet some reduction in activity is desirable. A child may be excused from the table if finished or disinterested in eating.
- Serve meals and snacks on a consistent schedule. Try to schedule meals before your child becomes overly hungry, tired or irritable. Most children require planned nutritious snacks to safeguard an adequate intake of nutrients and calories.
- Offer a variety of healthy foods and children will eat what they need. Remain calm if your child leaves a portion of an entire meal untouched.
- Mealtime is a good family time and a time to teach nutrition by example.
- Good eating habits that preschoolers learn from their parents and caregivers can develop into lifelong patterns.

Snacks

- Snacks need to be offered between meals because it is hard for young children to eat enough in three meals to provide the nutrients and calories they need. Snack time may be a good time to introduce new foods. Many times children will refuse food at mealtime, but accept them for a snack. Snacks should provide more than just calories. Snack foods that have more than just calories include: dry cereal with milk; meat or peanut butter sandwiches; vegetable or fruit breads such as pumpkin or banana; fresh, dried, or canned fruit; fruit or vegetable juices; plain yogurt or yogurt with fruit; cheese and crackers; or oatmeal cookies and milk.

Food jags and new foods

- Most preschoolers experience food jags and might eat only a few self-selected foods. When a parent or caregiver prods, the child is less likely to try new foods. Finicky food habits are often temporary and will disappear if not reinforced by emotions and unnecessary rules. Food should not become the object of bribes or punishments. If a food is rejected, do not make an issue of the situation as this may make your child more determined to refuse the food being offered. Offer the rejected food at a different time. Allow preschoolers as well as adults to dislike foods. Watch family behavior. Are some foods rejected by adults in the family? Serve a variety of foods even if rejected by some adult family members.
- Give special consideration to providing foods that appeal to the child's senses. Include finger foods; foods that crunch or crackle when you eat them; foods that differ in texture; foods with different flavor. Foods that are too hot or too cold may be refused. Children may try a new food if it is prepared to be attractive to them, such as cut in interesting shapes. Present new foods at the beginning of the meal when your child is really hungry. Brightly colored vegetables also may attract acceptance. Most children enjoy the true flavor of foods that are not overwhelmed with sauces, gravies, syrups, herbs and spices. A favorite or familiar food served with the new food may encourage the acceptance of different foods.
- Make sure your child is not too excited from play or too tired to eat at mealtimes.

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