

Healthy Lifestyles for Children

Ernestine Thompson, Children and Families Initiative Coordinator at the National Heart Foundation of Australia, discusses the importance of healthy lifestyles for children.

Nutrition for life

Adequate nutrition is vital throughout all stages of life. Young children in particular need adequate nutrition to promote good health and growth but often forget to eat adequately because they are eager to play or are too exhausted from physical activity.

Children develop eating habits that usually last a lifetime and it is important they learn about healthy eating and how to make healthy food choices as good eating habits can influence their future health. It has been shown that major health problems in Australia such as heart disease, obesity, some cancers and diabetes are related to poor eating habits.

Research indicates that the nutritional practices of school aged children are not ideal. An alarming number of children are overweight or underweight, and many miss breakfast and snack regularly on high-kilojoule, low-nutrient foods. Rapid socio-economic change, combined with the pressures of advertising and marketing, has shifted children's preferences towards less nutritious foods.

The *Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents in Australia* (NHMRC, 2003) highlight the groups of foods and lifestyle patterns that promote good nutrition and health.

Putting food on the table

For children to keep up their energy and survive a busy day, they need to eat a variety of foods. The amount of food a child eats will vary according to their age, sex and activity level. Active children require more energy and therefore more food.

Offering a variety of foods to children provides a range of nutrients essential for good health. Variety in colour, texture, flavour, smell and temperature can also spark interest in foods children may not have liked previously. For example, a child may not like a boiled egg alone, but may love scrambled eggs on toast, an omelette with tomato and ham, french toast or a vegetable frittata.

Try to offer children new foods. The more times children are offered a new food, the more likely they will accept it, especially if they see peers or role models (particularly parents) enjoying the food.

This article relates to:

FDCQA: Principles 2.2, 3.5, 4.3, 4.2

OHCQA: Principles 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2

QIAS: Principles 4.1, 4.6, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3

Important foods

As part of any healthy eating plan it is particularly important to include mainly plant-based foods such as cereals, rice, pasta, bread, vegetables and fruit. These are low in saturated fat, high in vitamins and minerals, and contain many other components helpful in fighting diseases such as heart disease and cancer. Because these foods are high in fibre they will also be more filling.

Fruit and vegetables add lots of colour and texture to every recipe. Encourage children to try a range of different coloured vegetables in different ways: try soups, vegetable sticks and dips, salads, or grated vegetables in pikelets, pancakes or muffins.

Baked beans are probably the most well known of the legume family (a type of vegetable). Legumes can make a quick, inexpensive and healthy meal or snack. Why not try other legumes such as dried peas in soups, lentils in casseroles, chickpeas in a patty or burger, or three-bean mix in a salad?

All of us can enjoy fruit everyday – encourage children to have at least two pieces per day. Fruit makes a great snack on its own, or can be added to many recipes.

Try stewed fruit on porridge, fruit-based muffins and slices or a milkshake made with fresh fruit.



Breads, cereals and grains provide the energy required for children to get through their busy days. It's easy to include variety from this group of foods. Try different breads, such as wholemeal, wholegrain, white, sourdough, light or dark rye. Introduce children to breads in different shapes like round rolls, long rolls, flat breads and wraps, muffins, baguettes or foccacias.

Plain breakfast cereals such as whole-wheat breakfast biscuits not only make a quick breakfast, they can also make a quick afternoon tea. Oats can be used in cookies and patties and of course make a hearty, warm breakfast in winter.

Drinks

Water is the preferred drink for all children. While milk is important for calcium intake, too much can lead to poor appetite. Three serves of dairy products daily, including milk, are recommended.

Make water an attractive choice for children by considering how it's served. To make tap water more appealing use decorative water jugs, serve chilled or with ice in summer, or add mint leaves or slices of lemon and other fruits such as oranges for flavour.

Sweet drinks such as fruit juices, juice drinks, cordials, sports drinks, flavoured mineral water, soft drink and 'fizzy' drinks are high in kilojoules and can increase the risk of tooth decay. They are also 'filling' and may take the place of healthier food choices.

What about fat?

There are three main types of fats found in food: saturated, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated. It is best for everyone, including children, to eat mainly polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats rather than saturated fat.

Suggestions for reducing saturated fat intake for children:

- Use a variety of oils for cooking – some suitable choices include canola, sunflower, soybean, olive and peanut oils
- Select lean meat (meat trimmed of fat and chicken without skin)
- Try to limit fatty meats including sausages and delicatessen meats such as salami
- Try to limit snack foods such as potato crisps and corn crisps to once a week
- Try to limit takeaway foods to once a week. Takeaway foods include pastries, pies, pizza, hamburgers and creamy pasta dishes



Saturated fats is the least healthy of the fats. Fat on meat, full-fat dairy products, many takeaway foods and processed foods such as pastries and most commercial biscuits contain a lot of saturated fats.

Polyunsaturated fats and monounsaturated fats are better for our bodies. It is preferable to include these fats in recipes, and

to choose foods that contain these fats, rather than saturated fats. Avocados, olives, nuts, seeds and some oils and margarine spreads contain mostly monounsaturated fats. Other oils and margarine spreads, fish, nuts and seeds contain mainly polyunsaturated fats.

When are reduced fat dairy products appropriate?

Children under two years of age need full-cream milk and dairy products for extra energy. After they turn two, you should gradually introduce reduced fat milk and dairy products. For most children over five years of age, reduced fat dairy products will be appropriate and should be encouraged. Reduced fat dairy products are generally high in calcium, necessary for healthy bones, and have reduced amounts of saturated fat.

Dental health

Good dental health is important for children's general health and wellbeing. It will help young children to eat, talk, smile and develop self-esteem. There are many ways to assist children to grow up with healthy teeth, including:

- At least twice daily gentle and thorough tooth brushing with a fluoride toothpaste after breakfast and before going to bed (children should use a low-fluoride toothpaste from two to six years, unless otherwise recommended by a dental professional)
- Regular dental check ups
- Enjoying a wide variety of nutritious foods
- Limiting sugary foods and drinks, especially between meals
- Drinking plenty of tap water, especially if fluoridated

Getting children involved

Children should be encouraged to be involved in food preparation and cooking whenever possible. Child care settings often provide a great opportunity for children to learn about food and nutrition in an informal and enjoyable way.

Safety is a key issue when children are involved in cooking. Carers need to supervise children closely during cooking activities and take up the opportunity to reinforce aspects of food safety.



Physical activity

Being physically active is important for good health and development during the growing years. It doesn't matter what age you are, physical activity has many benefits. Physical activity can help young people feel more energetic, feel better about

themselves, feel more relaxed, and very importantly, it helps them stay healthy. For children, being involved in physical activity early in life hopefully helps establish healthy long term behaviours.

The Heart Foundation supports *Australia's Physical Activity Recommendations for Children and Youth* (Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, 2004). Children are growing and developing and should be active every day for a minimum of one hour. This should include physical activity from a range of activities such as walking, playing and recreation. A mix of both moderate and vigorous activity is recommended. Some activity is better than none at all, and more is better than a little. Encourage inactive children to start with half an hour of physical activity per day and increase gradually.

Setting a good example

Food and play are a major part of everyday life and an enjoyable social experience that children and carers can share together. Interacting with children by sharing healthy snacks and participating in games and activities enables carers to be positive role models. For example, carers who drink water rather than sweet drinks during the program will encourage children to drink water as well. Carers getting involved in games and activities with children will also encourage more children to join in and be active.

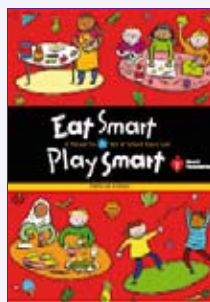
In the home, parents and other adults are important role models for healthy eating and increasing physical activity. The ways in which parents eat

food, and the types of food they choose to eat, will influence their children. For example, if parents eat fruit then their children are more likely to enjoy fruit too.

Parents and carers can:

- Be active and encourage children to join in
- Encourage children to try vegetables and fruit in different forms such as raw, cooked, canned, dried and frozen
- Support children to be active in as many ways as they can through play, transport (walking and cycling), outdoor activities and everyday tasks
- Be active with children (especially cycling, walking and active games)
- Present food in a way that encourages children to eat it, for example have some chopped vegetables or fruit on a table that can be 'picked at' when they feel like it
- Think of active alternatives when a child says 'I'm bored'
- Involve children in the selection and preparation of vegetables and fruits; it helps to make them interested in the food they are eating and it's a good way to teach them about different varieties
- Restrict sedentary 'down time' by limiting (controlling or rationing) sedentary and solitary activities such as television, videos and computer games
- Incorporate physical activities into outings ■

Eat Smart, Play Smart



A Manual for Out of School Hours Care

The Heart Foundation has been working with the Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) sector for several years. As part of the project, the resource *Eat Smart, Play Smart – A Manual for Out of School Hours Care* has been developed. The manual focuses on fun, healthy ideas that can be easily incorporated into OSHC programs with the aim to encourage children to enjoy food preparation, healthy eating and physical activity on a daily basis.

To order your copy, visit - www.heartfoundation.com.au/eatsmartplaysmart or call

Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents in Australia

The *Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents in Australia* highlight the groups of foods and lifestyle patterns that promote good nutrition and health. These guidelines are not in order of importance and each one deals with an issue that is key to optimal health.

- **Encourage and support breastfeeding**
- **Children and adolescents need sufficient nutritious foods to grow and develop normally**
 - growth should be checked regularly for young children
 - physical activity is important for all children and adolescents
- **Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods**
- **Children and adolescents should be encouraged to:**
 - eat plenty of vegetables, legumes and fruits
 - eat plenty of cereals (including breads, rice, pasta and noodles), preferably wholegrain
 - include lean meat, poultry and/or alternatives
 - include milk, yoghurt, cheeses and/or alternatives (reduced fat milks are not suitable for young children under 2 years, because of their high energy needs, but reduced fat varieties should be encouraged for older children and adolescents)
 - choose water as a drink (alcohol is not recommended for children)
- **Care should be taken to:**
 - limit saturated fat and moderate total fat intake (low-fat diets are not suitable for infants)
 - choose foods low in salt
 - consume only moderate amounts of sugars and foods containing added sugars
- **Care for your child's food: prepare and store it safely**

(NHMRC 2003, *Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents in Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia.)

Australia's Physical Activity Recommendations for Children and Youth

1. Children and youth should participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical intensity physical activity every day
2. Children and youth should not spend more than two hours per day using electronic media for entertainment (e.g. computer games, Internet, television) particularly during daylight hours

(Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, 2004)

References and Further Reading

- Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. (2004). *Australia's Physical Activity Recommendations for Children and Youth*.
- Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing & National Health and Medical Research Council (2003). *Food for Health – Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents in Australia. A guide to healthy eating*.
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- Tansey, S. (2005). *OSHCQA Factsheet #1: Nutrition and Healthy Eating*. National Childcare Accreditation Council: NSW.