

December
2006

Childcare and children's health

An information sheet for parents

Good Nutrition

What children eat is fundamental to their health, growth and development. In Australia, we are fortunate in having a wide range of foods available and many children experience the pleasures of eating foods from diverse cultures. But not everything children eat contributes to their health, and choosing food that fulfils children's nutritional needs can be challenging.

Guidelines for good nutrition

The following guidelines are recommended by Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NH & MRC) to promote healthy growth and development for infants and young children, through good nutrition:

- Breast feeding is a perfect food for infants and has immediate and long-term health benefits
- Children need a wide variety of nutritious foods including vegetables, fruits, cereals, dairy products and lean meats, poultry and fish
- Children's food should be low in added salt and sugar
- Fat intake, especially of saturated fats, should be limited in children's food.

Note: Low fat diets are not suitable for infants.

Reduced fat milk is unsuitable for children younger than 2 years.

Basic food needs for children:

- Protein from fish, poultry, meat (or substitutes) and dairy, to build their bodies
- Vegetables and fruits to provide vitamins, minerals and fibre. Note: fruit juices are not recommended as they have high sugar levels and may lack fibre
- Starchy carbohydrates, from whole-grains for example, are needed for energy
- Good (unsaturated) fats, including fish and olive oil, are essential to good health and build brain and nerve cells. Saturated fats and 'trans fats' (often listed as partially 'hydrogenated vegetable fats') should be avoided.
- Water. Water is a better nutritional choice than juice and tap water containing fluoride has health benefits that are lacking in bottled water.

Additional considerations

Obesity and overweight has become a serious problem affecting about 25% of children in Australia. Obesity is not just a result of overeating, but the large food serves and foods with high fat and sugar levels contribute significantly to weight problems. To help children develop good eating habits, consider the following:

- Quantity of food is important. Offer small portions, with 'seconds' only if required
- Children go through growth and activity spurts and these affect their appetites. As long as they are offered a range of nutritious foods, a healthy child's appetite can be trusted to determine how much they need to eat
- Many 'fast-foods' have little nutritional value but have high fat, sugar and salt levels. Children may develop a taste for these, making other foods seem unappetising
- Try offering 'special', healthy food, such as seasonal fruit, as an alternative to sweets and fast foods for birthday parties and other celebrations
- Children's tastes change over time. New foods may need to be offered several times before the child will accept tasting it
- Involving children in preparing food can help to develop their interest and understanding of healthy food choices
- Attractive presentation of healthy foods may help encourage fussy eaters.



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