

# Feeding toddlers



**Toddlers from 1 to 3 years are growing and learning rapidly and becoming more independent. They enjoy doing things for themselves and having some choice.**

**Children are learning about foods and laying down eating habits for the future. Developing healthy eating habits in these years will help them grow into a healthy adult.**

## Tips for happy mealtimes

**Let your toddler decide how much they eat**

- It's up to parents to decide what food is offered and when.
- It's up to children to decide if they are going to eat and how much they eat.
- Children are good at knowing when they are hungry and when they are full. Let their appetite guide how much they eat.
- It's normal for a child's appetite to vary from day to day.

**Offering toddlers a variety of healthy foods means they will eat well whatever they choose. You are also encouraging positive eating habits for the future.**



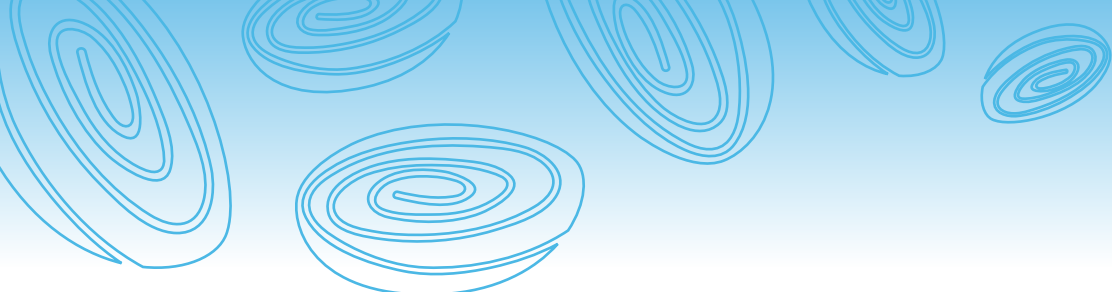
**Be patient and calm**

- Let children eat to their appetite. Remove uneaten food without comment. The less fuss you make the better.
- Avoid pushing children to eat everything on their plate. They should eat because they are hungry.
- Avoid bribes, games or threats to make them eat.
- Avoid saying things like 'If you eat all your vegetables you can have dessert.' This makes dessert seem more desirable which is not the best message. Dessert can be offered as part of the meal if desired, eg small serves of yoghurt or fruit.

**Avoid distractions**

- Turn the TV off, put toys and phones away and pets outside so you can all focus on the meal.
- Use a highchair or booster seat so your child can remain at the table.

**A healthy toddler will eat if they are hungry. Let their appetite guide how much they eat.**



### **Encourage your child's appetite**

- Try to have meals at regular times so your child learns about feeling hungry and then satisfied after a meal.
- Allow at least 3 hours between main meals.

### **Eat with your child**

- Mealtimes are social occasions that can bring the family together.
- Show you enjoy being with your child.
- Talk about the day rather than focus on the meal.
- Keep meals to no more than 20-30 minutes.

### **Serve age-appropriate foods**

- Offer food appropriate for your child's stage of development, eg mashed, cut into small pieces.
- Offer small helpings of food. A plate piled high can put a child off eating. They can always ask for more.

### **Keep offering new foods**

- Children are usually wary of new foods and may need to see a food 10 times or more before they decide to try it.
- Offer small amounts of a new food with foods they already like. Let them see you eating that food too.
- Children will often eat new foods in a different setting, eg a picnic, at a market, eating with other children.
- Set a good example. Show that you enjoy eating a variety of healthy foods.

### **Encourage independent feeding**

- Encourage children to feed themselves. Be patient as they practise this skill.
- Children like to have some control over what they eat. Offer some choice at meal and snack times.

### **Tolerate mess**

- Allow your child to have food on their face and hands. There is no need to wipe their mouth with a spoon or tissue after each mouthful.
- Let them touch and squish foods.
- Put a plastic sheet under the highchair to catch falling food.

### **Encourage an interest in food**

- Help children become familiar with foods. You could talk about where foods come from and involve them in things like meal planning, shopping, unpacking groceries, and washing, chopping, grating, mixing or mashing foods under adult supervision.
- Involve them in mealtime routines, eg handwashing, setting the table, serving food, kitchen tidy-up.
- Invite a friend over for a meal. Enjoy a picnic in the back yard.
- Have fun family rituals, eg home-made pizza on Fridays.

### **Encourage mealtime manners**

Have clear, reasonable expectations about behaviour at mealtimes. You could say things like, 'In our family we:

- eat at the table
- put phones away and the TV off
- always say 'Please' and 'Thankyou'
- include everyone mealtime conversation'.

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**Stay calm and avoid battling with your child over food. Happy mealtimes benefit everyone.**  
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## The 5 food groups

Aim to offer your toddler a variety of foods from the 5 food groups each day. Providing a variety of tastes and textures helps children accept a wider range of foods as they grow up.

The 5 food groups are:

- **Lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, legumes (beans), nuts, seeds.** These provide protein and iron for growth and development.
- **Grains,** eg oats, bread, rice, pasta, couscous, quinoa.
- **Dairy,** eg yoghurt, cheese.
- **Fruits.** Offer a variety of fresh, frozen or tinned.
- **Vegetables and legumes (beans).** Offer a variety of fresh, frozen or tinned. Include vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower and spinach rather than just the sweeter ones like carrot and sweet potato.

## 'Every day' and 'Sometimes' foods

Describe foods as 'Every day' and 'Sometimes' foods rather than as good or bad.

- **'Every day'** foods are those from the 5 food groups that are eaten every day.
- **Limit 'Sometimes' foods** - those high in fat, salt or sugar, eg cakes, lollies, biscuits, chips, ice cream, fried foods, soft drinks, and processed meats such as ham, sausages, salami, cabana. It's best to keep these for special occasions, and easier if you resist having them in the house.

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**Limit foods high in sugar, fat or salt.  
Don't give children hard foods as they  
can choke.**  
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## Drinks

### Water

- Plain tap water is the best drink for children and the whole family.
- Children can start drinking water from a cup from 6 months.
- Offer plenty of water throughout the day.



### Milk

- Children can start drinking cow's milk from 12 months.
- They should drink milk from a cup rather than a bottle to help prevent tooth decay.
- Offer no more than 500mls of milk each day. Too much can fill them up and reduce appetite.
- Up to 2 years of age, offer plain, full-cream cow's milk.
- From 2 years, children can have either full-fat or reduced-fat milk with the rest of the family.
- Toddler (formula) milks are usually not needed.
- Keep breastfeeding for as long as you and your child want to. You can breastfeed for 2 years and beyond.

### Drinks to avoid

- Avoid fruit juices, cordials and soft drinks. They can cause weight gain and tooth decay.
- Do not give children tea, coffee or sports drinks.

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**Water is the best drink for the whole  
family. Set a good example and drink  
plenty of water yourself.**  
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## How much do toddlers eat?

The amount toddlers eat varies greatly from child to child and day to day. They have small stomachs so need small amounts often, eg 3 small meals and 2-3 snacks each day. Below is a guide to serving sizes from the 5 food groups.

### Lean meat, poultry, fish, tofu, eggs, nuts, seeds, legumes (beans)

At least 1 serve each day

- 2 thin slices cooked lean meat, chicken, turkey
- ½ cup cooked meat, chicken or fish, as a stew, casserole, curry, bolognaise or pattie
- 2 eggs, eg boiled, scrambled or as an omelette
- 1 cup baked beans
- 1 cup tinned lentils, peas or beans, eg kidney beans, cannellini beans, chickpeas, 4 bean mix, dahl or soup
- 1 small cooked fish fillet (100g)
- 1½ tablespoons of nut or seed paste, eg peanut butter, almond butter, tahini
- ½ cup cubed tofu



### Grains – wholemeal or wholegrain where possible

4 serves each day

- 1 slice of bread or ½ medium roll
- ½ flatbread, eg chapati, roti, pita
- 3 cracker biscuits
- 1 crumpet or English muffin
- 2 breakfast biscuits, eg Weetbix, Vitabrits
- ½ cup cooked porridge, eg oats, rice, maize porridge
- ⅔ cup breakfast cereal flakes or ¼ cup muesli – choose low-sugar products
- ½ cup cooked rice, pasta, noodles, couscous, quinoa



### Vegetables and legumes (beans)

Offer vegetables of a variety of different colours

At least 2½ serves each day

- 1 cup of salad vegetables
- ½ cup cooked green, orange or mixed vegetables
- ½ potato or other starchy vegetable, eg sweet potato
- 1 cup baked beans
- 1 cup tinned lentils, peas or beans, eg kidney beans, cannellini beans, chickpeas, 4 bean mix, lentil dahl or soup
- 1 tomato chopped, or handful of cherry tomatoes cut into halves



### Fruits

Fresh, frozen or tinned

At least 1 serve each day

- 1 banana or orange (cut up with pips removed)
- 1 apple grated, thinly sliced, or cooked and mashed
- 1 slice melon, eg watermelon, rockmelon
- 2 small fruits, eg kiwi fruit, apricots, plums
- 1 cup diced or tinned fruit (no added sugar)
- 30g dried fruit (occasionally) eg 4 dried apricot halves, 1½ tablespoons sultanas



## Dairy

At least 1½ serves each day

- Breastmilk (if you are breastfeeding)
- 1 cup (250ml) of cow's milk
- 1 cup (250ml) soy milk – calcium fortified
- ¾ cup (200g) yoghurt or custard
- 2 slices cheese (40g)
- ½ cup grated cheese or ricotta cheese

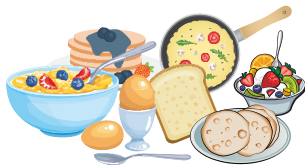


## Meal and snack ideas

Toddlers can eat many foods enjoyed by the rest of the family as long as they are safe, eg soft, chopped, thinly sliced or grated and with skins off, bones, gristle or pips removed. Do not add salt or sugar to your toddler's food.

**Iron-rich foods are shown in bold and blue below.**

### Breakfast



- **Weetbix** with milk, with chopped fresh or tinned fruit
- Porridge cooked with milk. Add chopped banana or other fruit
- Yoghurt with chopped fresh or tinned fruit
- Toasted wholemeal or wholegrain bread with butter or margarine and Vegemite, mashed avocado, grated cheese or a **cooked egg**
- Fruit smoothie, eg blend strawberries, banana, milk and ice
- Toasted fruit bread or fruit muffin with margarine

### Lunch



- **Baked beans** and wholemeal bread or flatbread
- Stew, casserole, dahl or curry with **meat**, vegetables, **lentils**
- Sandwich, rice cakes or flatbread with filling or topping, eg avocado, cream cheese, grated carrot, finely sliced roast **meat or chicken, tuna or salmon, smooth peanut butter**, Vegemite, cheese, **mashed hard-boiled egg**
- Soup with vegetables, **meat, chicken, lentils or beans**
- Falafel with salad vegetables and hommus dip
- Noodles or rice with **tuna, salmon, chicken, meat** and vegetables
- Salad plate with chopped or grated salad vegetables (grate hard vegetables) cheese, **cooked meat or chicken** and bread
- Fill a lunch box with cherry tomatoes cut into halves, lettuce, cucumber slices, **hard-boiled egg, strips of cooked roast meat, chicken**, cheese cubes and small bread roll
- **Boiled, poached or scrambled egg**, with vegetables and bread or toast



## Dinner



- **Roast meat or chicken** – chopped, with mashed potato and steamed broccoli, carrot, pumpkin
- **Bolognaise sauce** with pasta and mixed vegetables
- **Chopped cooked meat or chicken** with stir-fry vegetables and noodles, couscous or rice
- **Omelette or scrambled eggs** with grated or diced vegetables
- **Tinned tuna or salmon** with cooked pasta or rice and vegetables
- **Crumbed fish** with rice and mixed vegetables
- Stew, casserole, curry, eg **meat, chicken, fish, lentils (dahl)** and vegetables
- Soup with **tofu, lentils** or split peas, vegetables and noodles
- Frozen, diced vegetables – add to small pasta and top with cheese
- Microwave a potato with skin on, top with baked beans and grated cheese. Serve with salad
- **Cooked takeaway chicken** with salad or vegetables
- Mini pizzas using pita bread or English muffins as the base – top with **chopped meats or chicken**, vegetables and cheese

## Snacks

2-3 each day



- Yoghurt or custard
- Diced tinned fruit
- Chopped banana, sliced or grated apple, kiwi fruit, plums, slice of melon
- Soft vegetable sticks – lightly steamed potato, carrot, green beans or pumpkin. Serve with dip, eg hummus, salsa, cottage cheese or **smooth peanut butter**
- Flat bread, eg pita bread or chapati, toast fingers, rice or corn cakes spread with hummus, avocado, **smooth peanut butter**, Vegemite, ricotta or cottage cheese
- Rice crackers, rice cakes or corn thins with cheese spread and cherry tomatoes cut into halves
- Cheese sticks or cubes of cheese
- Sultanas (occasionally)
- **Canned beans, eg 3 bean mix, kidney beans**
- Savoury pikelets made with finely grated vegetables
- Home-made muffin with fruit
- Raisin bread



## What about allergies?

Food allergy is common in Australia. About 1 in 10 toddlers has an allergic reaction to foods such as cow's milk, egg, wheat, fish, soy, peanut, tree nuts, sesame and shellfish.

Children with food allergies must avoid the food they are allergic to.

If you have any concerns about allergies seek medical advice. Allergies should be diagnosed by a doctor.

Research shows that introducing common allergy-causing foods in the first year can help reduce the risk of food allergy. If your child is already eating common allergy-causing foods such as egg and peanut, continue to offer these foods regularly - around twice a week.

If your child is not yet eating these foods, you could start to include them in their diet. For more information on how to do this see [www.preventallergies.org.au](http://www.preventallergies.org.au).

## Safe eating

Children under 4 years can easily choke on foods.

- Always sit children down to eat. Do not give them food if they are running, playing, laughing, crying.
- Never force a child to eat.
- Do not give children hard foods, eg chopped apples or carrots, popcorn, lollies, corn chips, hard crackers, whole nuts. Nuts can be ground or offered as a nut paste.
- Apples and carrots can be grated or cooked until soft and chopped.
- Remove skins from foods such as sausages, frankfurters.
- Remove bones from fish, and gristle and fat from meats.
- Remove pips and stones from fruits such as cherries, oranges, peaches.
- Cut round foods in halves, eg cherry tomatoes, grapes.

## Food safety

- Always wash your hands before preparing foods.
- Use clean equipment when preparing, serving or storing foods.
- Animal foods, such as meat, chicken, fish and eggs should be well cooked.
- Fruits and vegetables should be thoroughly washed before use.
- Always use products before their use-by date.
- If using pre-packaged or canned foods or food defrosted from the freezer, decide how much you will offer, and spoon it into a small bowl. Store any extra in a clean, covered container in the fridge. Use it by the end of the next day.
- Never re-heat foods more than once.

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**Always stay with children while they eat to make sure they are safe. Children can easily choke on foods.**

**Allergic reactions to foods can include rashes, swelling of lips, face, eyes or throat, or going pale or floppy.**

**If your child has trouble breathing or becomes floppy, call 000 for an ambulance immediately or get someone else to do it. The operator will stay on the line to assist you.**  
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## Getting help

If you have any concerns about your child's eating you could make an appointment with the Child and Family Health Service (phone 1300 733 606). The nurses can check if your toddler is growing well and answer any questions you may have. You could also seek advice from your doctor, dietitian or other health professional.

### Want more information?

#### Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on child health and parenting, including feeding babies and toddlers

#### Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri for an appointment with a child health nurse  
[www.cafhs.sa.gov.au](http://www.cafhs.sa.gov.au)

#### Women's and Children's Health Network

The Department of Nutrition has a number of resources on feeding babies and children  
[www.wch.sa.gov.au](http://www.wch.sa.gov.au)

#### Breastfeeding Helpline

Phone 1800 mum2mum 1800 686 268

#### Start them right

A parent's guide to eating for under 5s produced by Healthy Tasmania  
[www.dhhs.tas.gov.au](http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au) Put 'Start them right' in to the Search box

#### National Allergy Strategy

For information on introducing common allergy-causing foods  
[www.preventallergies.org.au](http://www.preventallergies.org.au)  
[www.foodallergyeducation.org.au](http://www.foodallergyeducation.org.au)

#### Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA)

For information on allergies and finding a specialist  
[www.allergy.org.au](http://www.allergy.org.au)

#### Dietitians Australia

To find an Accredited Practising Dietitian [www.daa.asn.au](http://www.daa.asn.au)

#### Raising Children Network

For information on raising children including feeding toddlers  
[www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

#### Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'First foods for babies', 'Living with toddlers', 'Sleep: children 0-6 years', 'Tantrums', 'Time in: guiding children's behaviour', 'Toilet training', 'Children biting', 'Milestones: children 0-4 years' and 'Learning to talk'  
[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

#### Acknowledgement:

The Department of Nutrition, Women's and Children's Hospital and the Child and Family Health Service were key collaborators in the development of this Guide. Parenting SA would like to acknowledge their expertise and thank them for their generous input.

**Note:** The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.



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#### Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

**Ph: 08 8303 1660**  
**[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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