



Feeding toddlers



Sometimes parents worry that their toddler is not eating enough healthy food. It can help to remember that parents decide what foods to provide and children decide how much to eat. If you provide healthy foods, your toddler will eat well whatever they choose.

Toddlers and eating

Toddlers are becoming more independent in their second year. They are learning to do things for themselves and want to have more control over what they eat. They don't want or need as much food because they are growing more slowly. They have small stomachs so need to eat small amounts often.

Sometimes toddlers are 'fussy eaters'. They may refuse food or not want to try new foods. Some have food 'fads' when they want to have the same foods over and over. Be patient with them. Keep offering small amounts of different foods.

If you are worried about what your child eats talk to your doctor or other health professional. Regular checks of their height and weight will help you know if they are growing well.

The role of parents and children

It is the role of parents to decide what foods to provide, and up to children to decide what and how much to eat. If you provide a variety of healthy foods and drinks for your toddler, you can feel confident that whatever they eat will be nutritious.

Children are good at knowing when they are hungry and when they are full. Let their appetite guide how much they eat.

At meal times

- Avoid distractions. Turn off the TV, put toys away and pets outside. Children should be focused on eating at meal times.
- Eat together as a family so your toddler can enjoy family time and see others enjoying a range of foods.
- Give your toddler small amounts of a new food at first. Try giving it with a food you know they like. It can take 10 times or more before toddlers will accept a new food.
- Be patient. If your toddler refuses food, try not to react. They can learn it's an easy 'button' to push. Take the food away without comment.
- If they don't want to eat the healthy option you have provided it's best not to offer unhealthy foods as an alternative. Remove the food and offer it (or another healthy option) when your toddler is hungry or at the next meal or snack time.
- Don't force a child to eat or tell them to finish what's on their plate. They may learn to keep eating even after they are full.

Try to keep meal times relaxed and happy and avoid battling with your toddler over food.

- Toddlers can be quite tired by dinner time which can affect the success of the evening meal. Try giving your toddler the main part of their evening meal earlier before they get tired, or make lunch their main meal. They can have a small amount with the family at dinner time.
- Put a plastic tablecloth on the floor and a big bib on your toddler. They are still learning to feed themselves and it can be messy. The more they practice the sooner they will learn. Encourage their efforts.



It can help to:

- have some fun family rituals such as pancakes for Sunday breakfast. Toddlers are more likely to enjoy foods they link with fun
- have a friend over for a meal. This may encourage toddlers to eat
- make meals ahead of time. Single serves of tuna mornay or other casseroles freeze well
- vary where and how you serve the food, eg have a picnic in the garden, or put food in the centre of the table so everyone can help themselves
- encourage an interest in food. Talk to your toddler about food, eg when you are shopping. Involve them in preparing meals. Let them do simple tasks such as stirring food. They can help grow food at home too.

What not to do

It is best to avoid:

- threats, scolding, rushing or bribery
- sitting at the table for a long time
- comparison with other children
- tricks or games to induce eating
- offering a food such as ice cream as a reward for 'good' behaviour, or telling children they can't have it due to 'bad' behaviour. Both will make this food seem more desirable
- using dessert as a bribe or a reward for finishing dinner, eg 'if you eat all your vegetables you can have dessert'. This sends the message that dessert is more desirable than vegetables which is not the best message for children. If you do offer desserts, give small serves and make sure they are healthy, eg fruit or yoghurt
- insisting that food is eaten. It is best if children's appetite guide how much they eat and they stop when they are full
- giving food as a reward, for comfort or to keep children busy.

Never force a child to eat. It can cause choking or make them dislike that food. It could also start a power struggle about food with your child.

'Sometimes' foods and 'Everyday' foods

Avoid describing foods as 'good' or 'bad'. Use the term 'sometimes' foods for things like chips, lollies, biscuits, soft drinks, cordial. Serve these only occasionally, eg at parties. Don't be tempted to buy the unhealthy foods children see on TV advertisements. 'Everyday' foods from the five food groups (breads and cereals, vegetables, fruits, dairy products, meat and meat alternatives) should make up most of your child's diet. Have plenty of these healthy options in the house.

If you don't have 'sometimes' foods in the house, children are less likely to ask for them.

What should toddlers eat?

Toddlers should eat a variety of nutritious foods every day.

- Vegetables: At least 2 serves per day, eg 1 cup salad and ½ cup cooked vegetables.
- Fruit: At least 1 serve per day, eg 1 banana or 1 slice melon.
- Dairy foods: At least 1½ serves per day, eg 100g of yogurt or custard and 1 cup of milk.
- Lean meat, fish, poultry, eggs, legumes: At least 1 serve per day, eg 2 thin slices meat, 2 eggs or 1 cup legumes, eg baked beans.
- Grain (cereal) foods: At least 4 serves per day, eg 1 slice bread, ½ cup cooked rice or pasta, 2 wholegrain breakfast biscuits and 1 small crumpet.

Don't worry if your child doesn't eat all of these every day. Their appetite varies each day depending on how active they are or if they are tired or unwell.



Example menu

Toddlers have small stomachs. They need to eat small amounts often, eg 3 small meals and 2–3 snacks each day. Offer small amounts and remove uneaten food without comment.

Breakfast

¼ cup wholegrain breakfast cereal, eg porridge with ½ cup milk, or 1 piece of wholemeal toast with a spread.

Mid morning

1 piece of fruit or 4 small crackers.

Lunch

½ cup baked beans with one slice of bread, or 1 sandwich with ham or cheese, grated carrot, tomato.

Mid afternoon

1 small tub of yoghurt or 1 slice of fruit bread.

Dinner

1 cup of pasta with bolognaise sauce and ½ cup vegetables, or 2 thin slices of roast meat (cut up), ½ cup mashed potato and vegetables.

Supper or additional snack

1 small tub of yoghurt, or custard with fruit

Drinks

Plain water and up to 2–3 drinks of milk (no more than 500mls) or 2–3 breastfeeds.

Food ideas

Breakfast

- Wholegrain cereals, eg porridge, muesli, wholegrain breakfast biscuits.
- Scrambled or boiled egg with wholemeal toast fingers.
- Pancakes with fruit and yogurt.
- Toast, fruit bread, crumpet or muffin.
- Rice cakes with peanut butter, avocado, mashed banana, a yeast spread or cheese.

Lunch

- Vegetable and bean soup with a wholemeal bread roll.
- Wholemeal toasted sandwich with cheese and avocado, tuna and creamed corn, baked beans or ham and tomato.
- A lunch box with cherry tomatoes (cut in half), lettuce, cucumber, steamed green beans or carrot sticks, boiled egg, cheese cubes and a small bread roll or wholemeal crackers.
- Pasta salad with chicken, 4 bean mix, vegetables.
- Tinned fish with a bread roll, tomato and grated carrot.

Dinner

Toddlers should be eating modified versions of the family meal, eg:

- 2 thin slices of roast meat (cut up), ½ cup mashed potato and pieces of steamed broccoli, carrot and pumpkin
- 1 cup pasta and bolognaise sauce and ½ cup mixed vegetables
- stir fry vegetables and meat with ½ cup noodles or rice
- tuna mornay served with ½-1 cup of pasta or rice and mixed frozen vegetables.

Snacks

- Fresh or tinned fruit (in natural juice) or small tub of yoghurt.
- Softened, lightly steamed vegetable sticks, eg carrot, celery, green beans. Add a low fat dip such as tzatziki or hummus.
- Cheese cubes or sticks and sultanas.
- Wholemeal pikelet or scone with margarine and jam.
- Wholemeal bread, toast, fruit toast, English muffin, crackers or rice cakes lightly spread with peanut butter, mashed avocado or banana, cottage or ricotta cheese or a yeast spread.
- Small can of baked beans.
- Hard-boiled egg.
- Home-made biscuits/muffins/slices. Reduce the amount of fat or sugar, add wholemeal flour, rolled oats, dried or fresh fruit or grated vegetables.





Drinks

Water

Plain tap water is the best drink for everyone including children. It's cheap, has no added sugar or flavourings and helps prevent tooth decay. Most children enjoy water if they get used to drinking it early.

Milk

Milk is an important drink for children. However, toddlers can fill up on milk and have less appetite for other foods. 500mls of milk per day is plenty. It's best to give milk in a cup, not a bottle to help prevent tooth decay. Breastmilk provides health benefits for toddlers well into their second year of life. Breastfeeding may continue for as long as the mother and child wish.

Children aged 1–2 years need full cream milk. Reduced fat milk should be encouraged for children over 2 years. Special 'toddler milks' are not needed.

Other drinks

Drinking too much of other fluids, eg fruit juice, soft drinks and cordials can make toddlers feel full and mean they are less likely to try new foods. This could make meal times a challenge. It can also lead to the development of overweight or obesity due to the extra kilojoules they are drinking.

Sweetened drinks are not necessary. Only offer these on special occasions and resist having them in the house. If you do give your toddler fruit juice, mix it with half water and limit to ½ a cup each day with a meal. Don't give children tea, coffee, sports drinks, energy drinks or alcohol.

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Set a good example. Let your toddler see you enjoying healthy foods and drinking plain tap water.
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Safe eating

Children under 4 years are at risk of choking on hard foods as they don't have the back teeth needed to chew food well.

- Always sit children down to eat. Do not give food or drink when they are running, playing, laughing or crying.
- Stay close and watch children while they eat.
- Encourage children to eat slowly and chew well.
- Cook, mash or grate hard fruit and vegetables, eg apples, carrots.
- Do not give foods that are tough and chewy, eg some meats.
- Cut small round foods in half, eg grapes, cherry tomatoes.
- Remove skins from sausages, frankfurts. Cut into small pieces.
- Remove seeds, stones, pips or bones, eg from fruits, fish.
- Do not give corn chips, popcorn, nuts, hard or sticky lollies, hard crackers.

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. The child health nurses can help with feeding babies, toddlers and young children. See www.cyh.com for child health and parenting information

Women's and Children's Health Network

For a range of brochures on feeding children under 5 years, including 'First foods', 'Healthy food, happy kids', 'Tucker for toddlers', 'Extending variety', 'Tips for happy mealtimes', 'Food labels for families' and 'Safe food and safe kitchens for young children' www.wch.sa.gov.au

Australian Breastfeeding Association

Breastfeeding Helpline Phone 1800 mum 2 mum (1800 686 268) 7 days a week
For information and breastfeeding support www.breastfeeding.asn.au

Raising Children Network

Information on feeding babies, toddlers and children www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

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



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department for Education and Child Development and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660

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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