

Children's diet - fruit and vegetables

Colourful and crunchy fruit and vegetables are an important and enjoyable part of your child's diet. Both vegetables and fruit contain essential nutrients that are important for their health, growth and development. If you eat and enjoy fruit and vegetables together with your children every day they will usually follow your example.

Children learn by example

Most babies eat fruit and vegetables as one of their first solid foods. After the first year, you may notice your child is more fussy with food as they become more independent eaters. Often this fussiness with food includes fruit and vegetables.

Parents may worry if their child starts to eat less fruit and vegetables from time to time, but usually it causes no harm. It is not possible to force children to eat more fruit and vegetables. The best way is for parents to enjoy fruit and vegetables as a daily part of your whole family's diet. It may take time, but this is how children learn best. So keep trying.

The benefits of fruit and vegetables

There are many reasons for everyone to enjoy eating a wide variety of vegetables and fruit. Vegetables and fruit provide important vitamins such as vitamin C and folic acid. They also have other plant substances that are thought important to help reduce the risk of some cancers and heart disease.

Any amount is better than none

All Australians are encouraged to eat two fruit and five vegetables daily, but many children and adults do not. Sometimes children may expect 'tastier' high fat and sugar snack foods instead. Perhaps parents give up offering vegetables or fruit because it seems children often leave these on the plate or in the lunchbox.

Continue to offer your child a variety of fruit and vegetables every day, and not just the type they like. Children's serving sizes may be small and depend on their age, appetite and activity levels. Remember any amount is better than none and always try to find ways to include more.

Encourage your child to eat more fruit and vegetables

If you follow healthy eating habits, your child may eventually follow your lead. Keep offering fruit and vegetables in a variety of ways, as children are more likely to eat what is familiar to them. Never assume your child dislikes a particular fruit or vegetable. The next time you offer it may be the day they decide to try it. Children's tastes do change with age.

The five steps to success include:

- Involving your child in food preparation and planning
- Enjoy fruit and vegetables
- Presentation
- Include fruit and vegetables wherever possible
- Keep trying.

Involve your child in food preparation and planning

Suggestions include:

- Involve your child in choosing which fruit or vegetables they would like.
- Take your child fruit and vegetable shopping and let them see, smell and feel the fruit and vegetables with you.
- Ask your child to draw a picture and describe the food to you.
- Let your child help wash and prepare fruit and vegetables. Use this opportunity to explore new colours and shapes.
- Encourage their skills by letting them make a simple salad to serve themselves.
- Count out grapes or berries together into a bowl.
- Grow some vegetables or herbs in the garden or pot. Let your child water and nurture the plant.

Enjoy fruit and vegetables

Suggestions include:

- Remember to enjoy meals together with your child whenever possible. If your child sees you eating and enjoying a wide variety of fruit and vegetables, they are more likely to join in.
- Sometimes a child may prefer their vegetables raw rather than cooked.
- A child may refuse new foods if mealtimes are stressful, so try and focus on the positives about the meal and avoid arguments.

Presentation

Suggestions include:

- Keep a bowl of fresh fruit handy. Keep some vegetables such as peas, cherry tomatoes, baby carrots and mushrooms in the fridge to grab for a quick snack.
- Make vegetables and fruit look great on the plate. Serve different coloured fruit and vegetables, chop them up for a change or serve them on a special plate.
- For reluctant eaters, try a new fruit and vegetable once a week.

Include fruit and vegetables wherever possible

Suggestions include:

- Include vegetables and fruit in a range of ways and with most meals and snacks.
- Rather than searching for new recipes, try to increase the variety or amount of vegetables added to your favourite family recipes such as pasta sauces, soups or stir-fries.

Snack suggestions

Include vegetables and fruit in snacks too. Try these ideas for snacks:

- Corn on the cob
- Jacket potato
- Pumpkin soup or minestrone
- Plain homemade popcorn
- Cut-up vegetables with salsa or yoghurt dips
- Muffins, pikelets or cakes made with added fruit or vegetables
- Frozen fruit or vegetable segments
- Skewers of fruit
- Stewed fruit
- Fruit crumble
- Tinned fruits in juice
- Fruit salad or a fruit platter.

Keep trying

Suggestions include:

- Children need to have the opportunity to learn, or sometimes to re-learn, to enjoy fruit and vegetables. Your role is to make them available. Remember your child may need to see a fruit or vegetable 10 or more times before they are ready to try it!
- Always include a small serving of vegetables on your child's plate. Encourage them to try but let them decide whether or not they eat them.
- Offer crunchy, raw vegetables before the main meal, when children are often most hungry.
- Try to avoid preparing alternative options to the meal you have prepared. Your child may choose to leave certain foods, but will learn to accept the meal offered if nothing else is put forward.

Healthy choices

All vegetables and fruits are healthy. Fruit and vegetables may be any colour, shape, texture or variety. They can be fresh, frozen, tinned or dried. They may be raw, cooked, steamed, boiled, microwaved, stir-fried or roasted.

Variety is important. Try to choose different coloured fruit and vegetables, particularly orange, green and red. Some examples are melon, stone fruit, broccoli, spinach, leafy greens, tomatoes, carrot and pumpkin. Sometimes vegetables and fruit can seem expensive. To keep down the cost, choose those in season and use frozen or tinned varieties as well.

Other issues

Common fruit and vegetable related issues include:

- **Fruit juices are not necessary** – it is better to eat the fruit instead and have a thirst-quenching glass of water. Fruit juices may be a good source of some vitamins, but the downside is they are high in natural sugars and low in fibre. If you do include fruit juice in your child's diet, limit this to one small glass per day.
- **Potato chips are not the best way to eat potato** – chips and crisps are made from potatoes but prepared by cooking in oil. They are high in fat and salt, and best left for special occasions.
- **Fruits bars and fruit straps are high in sugar** – even though they usually contain some fruit, they are low in fibre and stick to children's teeth, so are best avoided. Children will enjoy a fresh fruit platter or frozen fruit pieces if offered instead.
- **Wash all fruit and vegetables** – research shows that the amount of pesticides on fresh vegetables and fruit is very low and no reason for concern, even in very young children and breastfeeding mothers. However, vegetables and fruit should still always be washed before eating to reduce the risk from any microbial contamination.
- **Follow the seasons** – when vegetables and fruit are out of season and more expensive, save money by using frozen, tinned or dried vegetables and fruit. These have vitamin and nutritional contents similar to fresh products.
- **Supervise young children** – to reduce the risk of choking, toddlers and young children should always be seated and supervised while eating all foods, including chopped raw fruit, vegetables and all 'hard' foods.

Where to get help

- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Your doctor

Things to remember

- Remember to offer children a variety of fruit and vegetables every day.
- The variety of fruit and vegetables eaten is more important than the amount.
- Children's serving sizes may be small and will depend on age, appetite and activity levels.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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