

# You, Your Child, and Food



Healthy Eating for Preschool Children

Age 2 – 5 Years

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers

*Go Healthy*

# Table of Contents

Welcome to Healthy Eating	2
Helping Your Child Learn Healthy Eating Habits—Tips and Basics	3
What Should Your Child Eat?	5
Recommended Canada’s Food Guide Servings	6
Vegetables and Fruit	7
Grain Products	8
Milk and Alternatives	9
Meat and Alternatives	10
Oils and Fats	12
Caution - Choking	13

# Welcome to Healthy Eating

This guide is for parents and caregivers of preschool children, and anyone else involved in their care.

**Helping preschoolers develop healthy eating habits** can be a challenge and the goal of this guide is to make it easier. This guide talks about how children learn to taste and enjoy new foods. Because young children's needs are very different from those of adults, it gives information on portions suitable for young children and encourages parents to recognize when a child feels satisfied. It covers the recommendations for healthy eating in Canada's Food Guide.

**Preschool children are curious.** They love to try new things. You can tap into this curiosity by offering your child a variety of nutritious foods. Eating a variety of foods helps a child get all the nutrients he needs. Variety is also a source of pleasure as a child discovers new tastes and textures.

**Remember** as you offer new foods that it takes time for a child to learn healthy eating habits, just as it takes time to learn to talk and walk. But with your support and patience, you and your family can enjoy healthy eating together. You'll be creating the positive experience that can lead to a lifetime of healthy choices.



# Helping Your Child Learn Healthy Eating Habits

## Tips and Basics

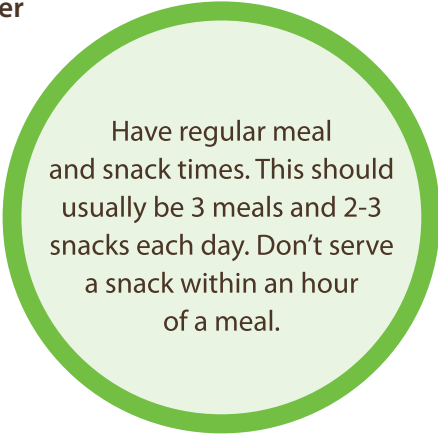
**You are in control of the food and beverages you offer your child.** Your child is in control of whether or not she eats them and how much. Serve your child nutritious foods and then trust that she will eat the amount of food that is right for her.

**You can help by offering the right portion sizes.** Depending on your child's age and appetite, this might be a full Food Guide Serving or only half that much (see pages 6 to 11). Let your child's appetite be your guide. Start with a small amount, and give seconds if she wants more. Serving too much at once can make a child feel like not eating at all.

**Remember** that children's appetites can change from day to day or meal to meal. Children should never be forced to eat or stop eating. Accept that your child will eat as much as he feels he needs.

**Set a good example by eating meals together.** Children tend to copy what adults do. Serve food at the table, and get rid of distractions. Turn off the TV and the computer and don't allow toys at the table. Enjoy your time together.

**Other than water,** it's best not to offer foods or beverages outside meal and snack times. Extra snacks can lead to tooth decay and interfere with the development of healthy eating habits.



Have regular meal and snack times. This should usually be 3 meals and 2-3 snacks each day. Don't serve a snack within an hour of a meal.

**Some children find meat hard to chew.** If this is a problem, cook it until it is softer. Cooking in extra liquid is a good way to make meat tender.

**Be creative and colourful.** For example, serve vegetables in different ways—cooked, grated, in salads or raw with dips (see section on choking on page 13).

**When you're offering a new food,** serve it along with familiar foods. Don't draw attention to the new food. Just serve it and let your child decide if he wants to taste it.

**Make eating easy.** Cut food into small bits that your child can handle. Accept that she may make a mess. Learning to eat neatly takes time.

**Offer a variety of foods at each meal.** Always include some foods that your child has eaten before. That way, if he decides not to eat one or two foods, he can still get enough to eat from the foods you have served. If your child refuses a food, do not try to make him eat it. Coaxing, forcing, bribing, punishing or playing food games may create eating problems and cause stress for you and your child at mealtimes.

**Don't prepare something different** for your child if she refuses all or part of the family meal. If you do, she will quickly learn that she can ask for something different, and she will be less likely to eat the foods you've already prepared. If you allow your child to pick and choose from the variety of foods you have prepared for the family, eventually she will learn to try new foods.

Be patient. You may need to offer a new food 20 times or more before your child tries it. And she may taste it many times before she decides to eat it. Let your child learn to enjoy foods at her own pace.



# What Should Your Child Eat?

**Offer a variety of foods from Canada's Food Guide** at meals and for snacks. Offer foods from all 4 food groups at a meal. Include foods from at least 2 food groups in a snack.

## **Serve vegetables, fruit and whole grain breads and cereals**

to make sure your child gets enough fibre. Include other sources of fibre such as legumes – e.g. dried peas in pea soup and peas pudding, baked beans, kidney beans in chili, lentils in soup and chick peas in hummus.

**Serve plain water when your child is thirsty.** Too much milk or juice can make children feel full and stop them from eating other foods. Preschool children need 2 cups of milk each day.

## **Limit foods and beverages that are high in calories,**

fat, sugar or salt (sodium) such as cakes, cookies, chocolate, ice cream, french fries, potato chips, soft drinks and fruit-flavoured drinks.

These fill children up quickly and take the place of healthy foods. They should not be a regular part of what your child eats.

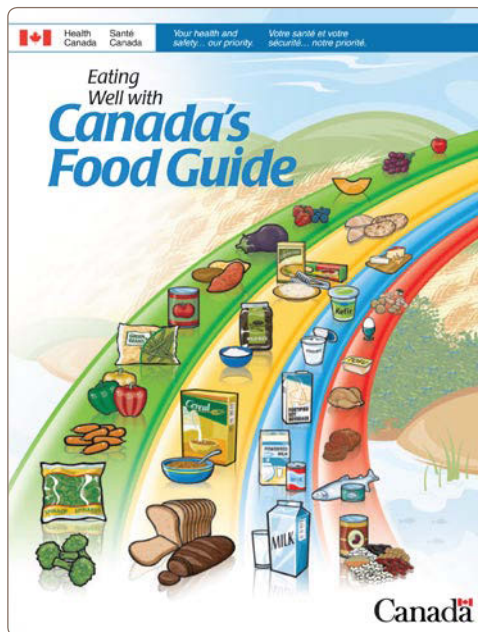
**Some nutritious foods** such as fish, cheese, peanut butter and avocados are natural sources of fat. There is no need to restrict these foods because of their fat content.

Offer your child the same foods that the rest of the family eats. He doesn't need a special "Kid's Menu" at home or when eating out.



# Recommended Canada's Food Guide Servings

- See Canada's Food Guide for more information on servings and tips about foods in each food group. Visit [www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide](http://www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide).



For young children,  
one Food Guide Serving from  
a food group can be divided  
into smaller amounts of  
food served throughout  
the day.

# Vegetables and Fruit

## Recommended number of Food Guide Servings per day:

- age 2-3 years - 4 servings
- age 4-8 years - 5 servings

## Examples of 1 Food Guide Serving:

- 125 ml (½ cup) fresh, frozen or canned vegetables, or cooked leafy vegetables
- 250 ml (1 cup) raw leafy vegetables
- 125 ml (½ cup) fresh, frozen or canned fruits
- 125 ml (½ cup) 100% fruit or vegetable juice (limit juice to no more than ½ cup per day)
- 1 whole fruit such as an orange or a banana
- 60 ml (¼ cup) dried fruit such as raisins or chopped apricots (**only for children 4 years and older, as these may be a choking hazard for younger children**).

## Tip

Offer vegetables and fruit more often than juice.





# Grain Products

## Recommended number of Food Guide Servings per day:

- age 2-3 years - 3 servings
- age 4-8 years - 4 servings

## Examples of 1 Food Guide Serving:

- 1 slice of bread (35 g)
- ½ bagel (45 g)
- ½ pita or ½ tortilla (35 g)
- 125 ml (½ cup) cooked rice or pasta
- 175 ml (¾ cup) hot cereal or 30 g cold cereal

## Tip

Make at least half of your grain products whole grain each day.

Choose grain products that are lower in fat, sugar and salt.



# Milk and Alternatives

## Recommended number of Food Guide Servings per day:

- age 2-3 years - 2 servings
- age 4-8 years - 2 servings

## Examples of 1 Food Guide Serving:

- 250 ml (1 cup) milk (skim, 0.5%, 1%, or 2%)
- 250 ml (1 cup) fortified soy beverage
- 175 g or ml (¾ cup) yogurt
- 50 g (1½ oz.) cheese

Although 2 cups of milk meet the Food Guide Servings recommended for children age 2-5, yogurt and cheese can still be offered in small amounts in addition to the milk. They provide different tastes and textures for your child to enjoy.

## Tip

Offer your child 2 cups of milk every day to help meet calcium and vitamin D needs. Offer fortified soy beverage if he does not drink milk.

Count the milk you add to cereal, cream soups and chowders, and to puddings you make at home. Pre-made commercial puddings have much less calcium than homemade and may not contain vitamin D. Some yogurts do contain vitamin D (check the label).



# Meat and Alternatives

## Recommended number of Food Guide Servings per day:

- age 2-3 years - 1 serving
- age 4-8 years - 1 serving

## Examples of 1 Food Guide Serving:

- 75 g (2 ½ oz.)/125 ml (½ cup) cooked fish, shellfish, poultry, lean meat
- 175 ml (¾ cup) cooked or canned legumes such as kidney beans, peas pudding, baked beans, black beans or chick peas
- 2 eggs
- 30 ml (2 tablespoons) peanut butter or nut butters
- 60 ml (¼ cup) shelled nuts or seeds (**only for children 4 years and older, as these may be a choking hazard for younger children**).



The one recommended serving per day from the Meat and Alternatives group can be divided into smaller amounts offered at meals and snacks. For example:

**One Food Guide Serving divided over one snack and two meals**

- 7.5 ml ( $\frac{1}{2}$  tablespoon) peanut butter ( $\frac{1}{4}$  Food Guide Serving) on toast at morning snack
- 18.75 g ( $\frac{1}{8}$  cup or 2 tablespoons) tuna ( $\frac{1}{4}$  Food Guide Serving) in a sandwich at lunch
- 37.5 g ( $\frac{1}{4}$  cup) chicken ( $\frac{1}{2}$  Food Guide Serving) at supper

**One Food Guide Serving divided over two meals**

- One egg ( $\frac{1}{2}$  Food Guide Serving) at lunch
- 37.5 g ( $\frac{1}{4}$  cup) ground beef ( $\frac{1}{2}$  Food Guide Serving) at supper

**Tip**

Select lean meat and alternatives prepared with little or no added fat or salt.



**Tip**

Include at least 2 servings of fish each week in the family meals.



# Oils and Fats

- **Include a small amount of unsaturated fat each day.** This includes oil used for cooking, salad dressings, margarine and mayonnaise.
- **Use vegetable oils** such as canola, olive and soybean.
- **Choose soft non-hydrogenated margarines** that are low in saturated and trans fats.
- **Limit butter, hard margarine, lard and shortening.**



# Caution Choking

**Any food can cause choking**, so make sure a parent or caregiver is always present when your child is eating. Make sure your child is sitting down and not laughing or jumping around. Certain foods can be more of a choking hazard for children under 4. These include foods that are:

- hard (such as nuts, seeds and raw carrot pieces)
- hard to chew (such as corn, shellfish, popcorn, candy, raisins and other dried fruits)

**Avoid these foods until  
your child is at least  
4 years old:**

- raisins, gum, candies,  
popcorn, nuts and seeds
- fish with bones
- snacks on toothpicks  
or skewers



**These foods are safer for young children when they are prepared as described:**

- **Hard vegetables or fruit - grate carrots;** soften hard raw vegetables or hard fruits by cooking so that they are easier to chew.
- **Cut grapes, wieners, sausages and other foods** that have a large round shape into quarters lengthwise and then into small pieces so they can't block a child's airway. Note: wieners and sausages are not good choices as they are high in fat and salt.
- **Remove pits and large hard seeds from fruit** (e.g. peaches, cherries, watermelon, apples, grapes, etc.).
- **Peanut butter or melted cheese given alone** (i.e. from a spoon) is hard to swallow and could get stuck in the throat and block air flow. To make these foods safer, spread thinly on a cracker or bread.
- **Foods that can be hard to chew** - cut these into small pieces.





## Looking for More Information?

Talk to your health care provider, public health nurse  
or registered dietitian for more information.

You can also check out the following websites for information  
on healthy eating and physical activity:

**Health Canada**

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca>

**Dietitians of Canada - Healthy Start for Life**

<http://www.dietitians.ca/healthystart>

  
**Newfoundland  
Labrador**

2013