

## Giving Your Toddler the Best Nutrition

Raising a healthy, active toddler takes work, and parents need to know the best foods to give their children. Feeding toddlers isn't always easy, but knowing about nutrition and eating habits will help you make the best choices for your child.

### Milk and dairy

Milk has protein for strength and growth, calcium for strong bones and teeth, and vitamins A and D for eyes and bones.

Babies younger than one year should not drink cow's milk. After they turn one year old, most children should drink whole milk for at least one year. The fat in milk helps children grow and helps their brains to develop. Toddlers should not drink nonfat or skim milk.

Some children drink too much milk, especially if they use a bottle instead of a cup. Try to get your child to drink two 8-oz cups of milk each day, then add variety with other healthy dairy foods like yogurt and cheese. Whole-fat versions of these foods can replace milk portions, if necessary.

### Juice and sugary drinks

Toddlers love these drinks, but parents need to limit how much their children get. Too much may cause children to gain weight and get bad teeth.

Offer plain water for drinking between meals. Give 100% fruit juice only as a treat, if at all. If you give your toddler juice, limit it to 4 oz per day. Only serve juice in an open cup, and not in a bottle or sippy cup. Try giving your child whole fruit instead of fruit juice.

Toddlers should not be given sugary drinks, like fruit drinks, sweetened bottled water, sports drinks, and soda.

### Multivitamins

Most children do not need to take a multivitamin. Your toddler should get plenty of vitamins from fruits, vegetables, milk, meat, and whole grains. Even if your child is a picky eater, he or she is probably getting enough vitamins and minerals.

Some children who do not drink enough milk might need to take extra vitamin D. Your doctor also might do a blood test to see if your child needs extra iron. If your child does not eat meat or has a chronic illness, talk to your doctor to see if your child needs extra vitamins.

### Fats

Fats are very important for children's brain development. About one-third of a toddler's calories should come from fats. You should give your toddler healthy fats, like peanut butter, milk, meat, avocados,

*continues*



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF  
FAMILY PHYSICIANS

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <https://familydoctor.org>.

This information provides a general overview and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your family doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject. Copyright © 2018 American Academy of Family Physicians. Individuals may photocopy this material for their own personal reference, and physicians may photocopy for use with their own patients. Written permission is required for all other uses, including electronic uses.

## Giving Your Toddler the Best Nutrition *(continued)*

and eggs. Examples of unhealthy fats are french fries, potato chips, doughnuts, and other junk food.

If your child is overweight, the best thing you can do is set a good example by eating healthy foods yourself. Do not eat junk food. Instead, eat fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and beans. Do not put your child on a special diet without talking to your doctor first.

### Eating habits

It is hard to know what toddlers will eat. They skip meals, refuse to eat some foods, and sometimes eat only one thing for days at a time. This is normal and is usually nothing to worry about. Your doctor will measure your child's growth every few months and show you the progress on a chart. It is important to keep giving your child different kinds of healthy foods to choose from. You might have to offer a new food 20 or more times before he or she likes it.

Children prefer a lot of small meals during the day. It takes many years for children to get used to eating three meals a day. Think of snacks as mini meals rather than treats. For example, a midafternoon snack might be milk, peanut butter on bagel pieces, and carrot sticks.

Letting toddlers feed themselves is important, even if it's messy. Children should get to make their own choices from the healthy foods you offer and use their fingers to pick things up. Turn off the television,

and sit at the table to eat with your child. This teaches your child good eating habits.

### Resources for more information

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Information Resource

<https://familydoctor.org/when-your-toddler-doesnt-want-to-eat/>

<https://familydoctor.org/nutrition-tips-for-kids/>

<https://familydoctor.org/growing-healthy-importance-starting-good-nutrition-early/>

American Academy of Pediatrics

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/nutrition/Pages/default.aspx>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition>

National Institutes of Health

<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/wecan/tools-resources/nutrition.htm>

U.S. Department of Agriculture

<https://www.cnpp.usda.gov/MyPyramid>

Adapted with permission from *Giving your child the best nutrition* [patient handout]. *Am Fam Physician*. 2006;74(9):1533-1534. <https://www.aafp.org/afp/2006/1101/p1533.html>. Accessed February 9, 2018.

August 2018