

Supporting long-term healthy habits

The experience of feeding children is vastly different from parent to parent, where some parents will have a relatively easy time, other parents may be at their wits' end and not know where else to turn for help. This handout provides a guide on the ideal diet for children and tips for how to incorporate it for children who may have a more challenging time with eating a varied diet.

What does the ideal diet look like in children?

- ✦ A wide range of protein sources
- ✦ A good serving of omega 3 fats 2 to 3 times per week, or daily if relying on plant-based sources
- ✦ 30 different plant foods per week
- ✦ 7 portions of vegetables and fruit per day
- ✦ Complex carbohydrates
- ✦ 3 main meals and 2 to 3 small snacks per day
- ✦ A mix of raw and cooked foods daily
- ✦ Calcium and iron-rich foods daily
- ✦ Minimal fried and processed foods
- ✦ Minimal free sugars
- ✦ Plenty of fluids

How to encourage healthy eating patterns in children

- + Set a good example**

Children learn a lot by watching the adults around them. If they see you enjoying fruits, vegetables and balanced meals, they are more likely to copy those behaviours. Make a point of eating the same healthy foods you want them to eat and show enthusiasm when trying new foods.
- + Make healthy food a normality**

Keep healthy options as the default in your home. Stock the fridge and cupboards with fruits, vegetables, whole grains and nourishing snacks rather than ultra-processed foods. When healthy eating is simply part of daily life, children grow up seeing it as 'normal' rather than 'special'.
- + Hide additional vegetables in sauces and desserts**

If your child is hesitant with vegetables, try adding them into meals in subtle ways. Blend spinach into smoothies, grate carrots into pasta sauces or add pureed pumpkin into muffins. These little additions can increase their nutrient intake without battles at the table.
- + Involve children in meal preparation**

Children are often more excited to eat something they've helped make. Invite them to wash vegetables, stir ingredients or choose toppings for their own wraps or pizzas. Even small roles help them feel proud of their contribution and more willing to try new foods.

+ Offer variety and colour	Present fruits and vegetables in different colours and fun shapes to make meals visually appealing.
+ Create a positive mealtime environment	Eat together at the table, without distractions like TV or devices.
+ Use positive language	Talk about how foods help the body grow strong and fuel fun activities (rather than focusing on restriction).
+ Give children choices	Let them pick between two healthy options (e.g. carrot sticks or cucumber slices) so they feel involved.
+ Keep healthy snacks accessible	Have fruit bowls, cut vegetables or yoghurt easily available instead of ultra-processed snacks.
+ Avoid using food as reward or punishment	This prevents unhealthy emotional associations with eating.
+ Repeat exposure	Offer new foods multiple times without pressure; children often need repeated exposure before accepting a new taste.
+ Get creative with presentation	Make snack platters, smoothie bowls or vegetable faces on plates to make food fun.
+ Teach food origins	Grow herbs, visit farms or talk about where food comes from to spark curiosity.
+ Encourage self-regulation	Allow children to listen to their hunger and fullness cues instead of insisting they finish everything.
+ Celebrate small wins	Praise trying new foods, even if they don't eat much of it.
+ Limit ultra-processed foods at home	If healthier options are the default, kids are more likely to eat them without fuss.

Making changes to children's diets can take time. Even small changes can make a big impact on health. Consistency is the key.