

Eating Well for Children Aged 1-4 Years

Why does eating well matter?

Eating well at 1-4 years old is important as it is a time of rapid growth and development. A poor diet in childhood can increase the risk of developing conditions in later life such as obesity, diabetes, coronary heart disease and some cancers.¹ A nutritious diet is linked to better long-term health and is important for brain development, mood, attention and behaviour.² Getting your child started with eating well when they are young will also help them to maintain good eating habits as an adult.

What should my child aged 1-4 years eat?

Young children have high energy and nutrient requirements for their size. This means that they need nutritious snacks as well as meals each day to meet their nutritional needs. It is important that children have portion sizes appropriate to their age and individual needs.

The British Nutrition Foundation has developed a guide for children aged 1-4 years called 5532 a day which gives examples of portion sizes suitable for this age.³ These are discussed in detail below.



A healthy balanced diet for children aged 1-4 years should be based around the four food groups and in the following portions every day:

Fruit and vegetables – at least 5 portions of a variety of different fruit and vegetables every day

Serve at least one portion at each meal and for some snacks. Choose a variety of different fruit

and vegetables to ensure that your child gets enough vitamins and minerals. Fresh, frozen, tinned (with no added salt or sugars) and dried all count towards 5-a-day. Dried fruit is best eaten at mealtimes to prevent tooth decay.

Starchy foods – 5 portions a day

Examples of starchy foods include potatoes, bread, rice, pasta, chapattis, yams, breakfast cereals and couscous. Offer a variety of white and wholegrain foods such as wholemeal bread and choose fortified breakfast cereals which are lower in sugar. It is not recommended to give only wholegrain starchy foods to under 2s as it can fill them up before they have had enough energy and nutrients.

Protein sources – 2 portions a day (3 for vegetarians)

This group includes meat, fish, eggs, beans, pulses and other non-dairy sources of protein. Fish should be served at least twice a week. One of these servings should be an oily fish such as salmon or sardines. Try to limit the amount of processed meat given e.g. sausages, bacon or ham. Whole nuts should not be given to children under 5 due to the risk of choking.

Dairy and alternatives – 3 portions a day

These include milk, yoghurt, cheese and custard. Children under 2 years of age should have whole milk or full-fat dairy products such as cheese and yoghurt. Whole milk and full-fat dairy products are good sources of calcium which help your child to develop strong bones and teeth. They are also a good source of vitamin A which is important for healthy skin and eyes and helps the body resist infections.

From 1 year of age, whole cows' milk can be given as a main drink. From 2 years, semi-skimmed milk can be given if your child is a good eater and growing well. Skimmed milk does not contain enough fat so should not be

given to children under 5. However, it can be used in cooking from the age of 1 year.

If your child has an allergy or intolerance to cows' milk, talk to your Health Visitor or GP for advice about suitable milk alternatives.

Moving on

Between the ages of 2 to 5 years, children should gradually move towards eating foods in the same proportions as the rest of the family as shown in the Eatwell Guide.⁴

Iron

It is essential that your child gets enough iron in their diet. Lack of iron can lead to iron-deficiency anaemia which can affect your child's physical and mental development. Therefore, it is important to eat foods rich in iron such as meat, fish, fortified breakfast cereals, dark green vegetables, lentils and broad beans. If your child does not eat meat or fish, make sure that they get enough from the other sources of iron.

Drinks

Offer your child water with meals and snacks about 6-8 times a day. You can also offer diluted fruit juice with meals (1 part juice to 10 parts water). Fizzy drinks and sweetened drinks should be avoided as they can fill your child up and stop them being



Photo credit: World Obesity Federation

hungry. Tea and coffee are not suitable drinks at this age as they can reduce iron absorption.

Fussy eating

Fussy eating is very common in children of this age. Please refer to our **Fussy Eating Factsheet** for further advice. If you have concerns about your child's eating, ask your Health Visitor or GP for advice.

Overweight and obesity

Being overweight or obese as a child is linked to early onset type 2 diabetes, asthma and cardiovascular risk factors such as high blood pressure. Children who are overweight or obese are more likely to suffer from behavioural and mental health problems. Being overweight or obese can lead to future health problems such as type 2 diabetes, some cancers and coronary heart disease. If you are concerned about your child's weight, speak to your GP for advice.

Vitamin supplements

It is recommended that all children under the age of 5 take a vitamin supplement of vitamins A, C and D. Recent guidance has been issued which advises that the vitamin D supplement should contain 10 micrograms of vitamin D.⁵ Healthy Start vitamins are available free to mothers and children up to the age of 4 years in receipt of specific benefits. If you are not entitled to the Healthy Start scheme, your Health Visitor will be able to advise you on where to purchase suitable supplements which are widely available in supermarkets and pharmacies.

References

1. SACN (2011) The influence of maternal, fetal and child nutrition on the development of chronic disease in later life. Available: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/339325/SACN_Early_Life_Nutrition_Report.pdf
2. British Dietetic Association (2020) Diet, behaviour and learning in children: Food Fact Sheet. Available: <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/diet-behaviour-and-learning-children.html>
3. British Nutrition Foundation (2019) 5532. Perfect portions for little tums (1-4 years). Available: https://www.nutrition.org.uk/attachments/article/1253/BNF%205532%20Leaflet_2019.pdf
4. NHS (2020) The Eatwell Guide. Available: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-eatwell-guide/>
5. Scottish Government (2020) Vitamin D: advice for all age groups. Available: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/vitamin-d-advice-for-all-age-groups/>