



Helping Your Toddler to Eat Well: Sharing the Responsibility

Parents decide what and when food is served

What food is served – Choose healthy foods for your family.

- At meals offer a variety of foods from all 4 food groups. For snacks, choose foods from at least 2 food groups. The 4 food groups are:
 1. Grain products including whole grain breads, cereals, bagels, muffins, tortillas, roti, noodles, and brown rice;
 2. Vegetables and fruits;
 3. Meat and meat alternatives like fish, poultry, lentils and beans, nuts and nut butters, tofu and eggs;
 4. Milk products such as whole milk and yogurt, cheese, soup and pudding made with whole milk. Low fat milk products and soy beverages are not recommended for children before 2 years of age.

For more information, see BC HealthFile [69b Meal and Snack Ideas for Your Toddler](#).

- Let toddlers choose within a food group like ‘bread or crackers’, ‘apple or kiwi fruit’.
- Serve a new food along with food your child likes to eat.
- Even if your child refuses to eat a new food, continue to offer it occasionally in positive ways, without pressure.
- Drinking too much juice, milk or other drinks can decrease your child’s appetite for food. Limit juice to ½ cup to ¾ cup (125-200 mL) per day. Limit milk to 2 to 3 cups (500-750 mL) per day.



When food is served – Young children need a routine for eating meals and snacks.

- Serve meals and snacks every 2 to 3 hours, including an evening snack.
- Offer water between eating times.
- Make mealtime a pleasant family time – talk about the day’s activities, put on some music and turn off the TV.
- Children often take longer to eat than adults. Don’t rush them.
- Toddlers that are full can sit with a book or toy while the rest of the family finishes eating.

Children decide whether and how much to eat

Whether to eat – Occasionally, it is okay for a child not to eat a meal or snack. Saying no to food is a way of having choice and independence. Never force a child to eat or punish a child for not eating.

- Children may not want to eat if they are tired, upset or excited. Plan quiet times before eating.
- Toddlers often ask for the same food day after day. Be patient, as this won’t last long.
- Don’t use desserts as a bribe or reward to eat the rest of the meal.
- Comfort your child with love and attention instead of food.

How much to eat – Let toddlers develop their own sense of when they are full. Sometimes, children will be hungry and eat a lot. At other times, they won’t eat very much.

- Serve small portions on small plates.
- Offer more food if the portion is finished.
- Don’t pressure a toddler to finish a drink or food. Remove uneaten food without comment.

Helpful tips

If your child refuses to eat:

A skipped meal will not harm a healthy child; so remove the food after about 15 minutes. Don't force your child to eat, but be prepared to offer a healthy snack in a few hours.

If your child won't try new foods:

Continue to offer new foods and foods your child has refused in the past. Children may need to see and touch a food many times before trying it. Don't force your child to try new foods.

If your child will eat only one food:

This is called food jag. Allow your child to eat what she wants if the food is healthy. Continue to offer other foods at snack and mealtimes. Food jags rarely last long. If the food is not a healthy food, limit how often it is offered.

If your child plays with food:

Children learn by touching – give your child time to explore food. Learning to use utensils also takes time. Plan time to sit and eat slowly with your child. Expect a mess – it's part of learning how to eat!

If your child will only eat certain foods:

Offer a variety of healthy foods but don't pressure your child. Paying attention to finicky eating reinforces the behaviour.

If your child won't eat vegetables:

Continue to offer vegetables. Children often prefer the bright colours and crisp textures of raw vegetables. Be a good role model by eating vegetables yourself. Offer fruit, as fruit provides similar nutrients to those found in vegetables.

If your child won't eat what is served and asks you to prepare something else:

Do not prepare separate meals for your child. Do include at least one food at each meal that your child likes to eat. Be supportive, but set limits. Offer a healthy snack in 2 hours.

If your child eats only a few bites of dinner, and then wants dessert:

If the rest of the family is offered dessert, offer it to your child as well. Offer desserts that have some nutritional value, such as fruit or pudding.

Offer less healthy choices, such as cake or pastry, less often.

By offering **healthy food choices** and **sharing the responsibility** for eating, mealtimes will be more pleasant, and most children will:

- learn to eat a variety of healthy foods;
- eat what they need to grow well;
- be less likely to be overweight; and
- be more likely to have a positive body image.



Questions about

- Food allergies
- Vitamin and mineral supplements
- Your child's growth or weight
- Vegetarian diets
- Meeting your child's iron needs
- Other food-related issues
- Books to read



Contact your community nutritionist, or Dial-A-Dietitian at 604-732-9191 or 1-800-667-3438 to speak to a registered dietitian.



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- In Greater Vancouver, call 604-215-4700
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