

Preschool Diet

During the preschool years, children grow slower, their motor skills mature, and they start to become more independent. They may eat less, start trying new foods and textures, and continue to decide which foods they like and dislike.

Healthy Eating Tips

- Encourage good eating habits by modeling positive behaviors: consuming a variety of foods and textures and consuming regularly scheduled meals and snacks with your child.
- The parent's job is to decide what food is offered, when the food is offered, and where foods can be eaten.
- The child's job is to decide if he/she will eat, what he/she will eat from the food offered, and how much he/she will eat.

Changes in Appetite

The preschooler's appetite can change from one meal to the next. A sudden increase or decrease in appetite is normal; large amounts of food may be eaten at one meal and little to nothing at the next meal. To deal with these changes in appetite, use small portions for each meal and serve more if your child requests more.

Food Preferences

Many preschoolers refuse or eat only small amounts of meats, vegetables, and mixed dishes. To help with these behaviors:

- Offer soft meats or other protein-rich foods such as peanut butter, cheese, or hard cooked eggs.
- Offer raw vegetables instead of cooked.
- Prepare simple, plain foods instead of mixed dishes such as casseroles.
- Keep food temperatures moderate; avoid offering foods that are too hot or cold.
- Encourage finger foods such as small sandwiches, celery sticks, or apple wedges.
- Serve new foods often even if they have been refused before. An initial refusal may be because the child is not familiar with the food.

Food Jags

Preschool children may like a wide variety of foods or they may want the same food day after day. Usually these "Food Jags" are an expression of independence and will not last long. Children should be able to choose what they want to eat as long as the foods offered are nutritious. Encourage your child to participate in preparing simple foods to promote acceptance of new foods.

Try the following: General Feeding Suggestions

- Eat meals together as a family.
- Eat at a table or counter and discourage eating while walking or playing. Try to limit distractions such as eating while watching TV.
- Allow for spills and messes. Preschoolers are still developing their motor skills and are more likely to spill.
- Use child-sized plates, cups, and utensils.

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- Do not bribe, force, or play games to get the child to eat.
- Set a schedule for meals and snacks that are 2-3 hours apart. Do not allow a child to “graze” and snack all day.
- Try to offer food before the child gets tired and cranky.
- Limit juice intake to 4-8 oz per day. It is best to dilute juice with water when it is offered.
- Offer nutritious snacks instead of sweets and fast food.
- Encourage your child to try new foods and textures.
- Use only a cup for liquids, not a bottle.

Safety

- Avoid foods that may cause choking such as nuts, chips, whole grapes, whole kernel corn, carrot circles, hot dogs, seeds, pits, hard candies, and popcorn.
- Keep pot handles turned inward on the stove and hot, easy to spill foods out of reach.
- Check food temperatures before serving.
- Keep toxic cleaning supplies away from and out of reach. Do not store toxic supplies in leftover food containers. Young children can easily mistake these colorful products or containers for food items.

Iron Deficiency

Iron deficiency is common in this age group. Include iron-rich foods daily such as:

- Red Meats
- Infant Cereals
- Whole grain or iron fortified cereals
- Dark green leafy vegetables
- Dried fruits
- Cooked dried beans
- Blackstrap molasses
- Egg yolks

Serve a source of Vitamin C, such as citrus fruits and juices, to improve iron absorption. Limit milk intake to 24 oz per day to encourage an appetite for other foods.

Dental Health

- Brush teeth after each meal.
- Give a fluoride supplement if tap water is not fluoridated or if the child only drinks bottled water.
- Limit sweet sticky foods.
- Never put children to bed with a bottle of juice or milk.

For more information on Preschool Nutrition visit following websites:

- Choosemyplate <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/health-and-nutrition-information>
- USDA website <https://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/preschool-nutrition>

This handout was provided to assist you with your child's nutritional needs. All nutrition plans should be individualized by working with a registered dietitian. Please get a referral for “Nutrition Clinic” from your Primary Care Provider. Then call (858) 576-1700 ext. 5999 to book an appointment with a dietitian.