

Helping Your Toddler Learn About Food

(1–2 Years)

Toddlers are unpredictable. The foods they like one day may be different the next. Here are answers to important questions you may have about your toddler's nutrition.

What can I expect my child to do as he grows?

At 1 to 1-1/2 years of age, your child will

- Grasp and release foods with his fingers.
- Be able to hold a spoon (but will not be able to use it very well).
- Be able to use a cup (but will have difficulty letting go of it).
- Want foods that others are eating.

At 1-1/2 to 2 years old your child will

- Eat less than babies and children 2 years and older.
- Like to eat with his hands.
- Have favorite foods.
- Get distracted easily.

At 2 years of age, your child will

- Be able to hold a cup.
- Be able to chew more foods.
- Have definite likes and dislikes.

How can I make mealtimes enjoyable?

- Be patient and understanding when your child makes a mess while she learns to feed herself—this is normal.
- Serve healthy foods for meals and snacks at scheduled times, but allow for flexibility.
- Use your child's favorite plate, bowl, cup, and eating utensils.



- Create a relaxed setting for meals (for example, turn off the TV).

I am struggling with my child over food. Is this normal?

- Your child may struggle with you over food in an attempt to make his own decisions and become independent. Struggling over food may make him even more determined.
- Keep in mind that you are responsible for what, when, and where your child eats. Let your child decide whether to eat and how much.
- Continue to serve a new food even if your child has rejected it. It may take several times before your child accepts the food.

What should my child eat?

- At mealtime, offer small portions of what the rest of your family is eating (for example, bread, pasta, or rice; fruits and vegetables; cheese or yogurt; and cooked lean meat, poultry, fish, or eggs).
- Children under 2 usually eat small portions. Offer small portions (for example, 1 or 2 tablespoons) and let your child ask for more if she is still hungry.
- Offer your child food every 2 to 3 hours for a meal or snack.



What should my child drink?

- Your child should drink about 2 cups (16 ounces) of whole milk per day. Drinking more than this can reduce your child's appetite for other healthy foods.
- Until age 2, do not give your child low-fat or fat-free milk. He needs the extra fat in whole milk for growth and development.
- Offer 100% fruit juice in small amounts, about 4 to 6 ounces per day. Drinking more than this can reduce your child's appetite for other healthy foods.
- Serve juice in a cup, not a bottle. Juice served in a bottle can cover your child's teeth with sugar for long periods of time and contribute to tooth decay (early childhood caries).
- Your child may not tell you when he is thirsty. Make sure he drinks plenty of water throughout the day, especially between meals and snacks.
- Children ages 3 to 5 years may eat these foods if they are prepared to make them safer. For example, cut hot dogs in quarters lengthwise and then into small pieces, cut whole grapes in half lengthwise, chop nuts finely, chop raw carrots finely or into thin strips, and spread peanut butter thinly on crackers or bread.
- Have your child sit while eating. Eating while walking or running may cause her to choke.
- Keep things calm at meal and snack times. If your child becomes overexcited, she may choke.
- Do not let your child eat in a moving car. If she chokes while you are driving, you will not be able to help her.

How can I prevent my child from choking?

- For children younger than 3, avoid foods that may cause choking, such as hard candy, mini-marshmallows, popcorn, pretzels, chips, spoonfuls of peanut butter, nuts, seeds, large chunks of meat, hot dogs, raw carrots, raisins and other dried fruits, and whole grapes.

How can I encourage my child to be physically active?

- Encourage active, spur-of-the-moment play, such as jumping and skipping.
- Play together (for example, play hide and seek or kick a ball). It is a great way to spend time with your child.
- Limit the time your child spends watching TV and videotapes to 1 to 2 hours per day.

Notes

Resources

American Dietetic Association
Phone: (800) 366-1655
Web site: <http://www.eatright.org>

USDA Food and Nutrition Information Center
Phone: (703) 305-2554
Web site: <http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic>

This fact sheet contains general information and is not a substitute for talking with your child's health professional about your particular concerns about your child.