



# Teaching Your Child About Food

(3–4 Years)

Children are curious about food, although they still may be reluctant to try new foods. Here are answers to important questions you may have about your child's nutrition.

## What can I expect my child to do as she grows?

### *At 3 to 4 years of age, your child will*

- Be able to use a fork.
- Be able to hold a cup by its handle.
- Be able to pour liquids from a small pitcher.
- Request favorite foods.
- Like foods in various shapes and colors.
- Like to imitate the cook.
- Have an increased interest in foods.
- Be influenced by TV.

### *At 4 years of age, your child will*

- Be able to use a knife and fork.
- Be able to use a cup well.
- Be able to feed herself.
- Be more interested in talking than in eating.
- Continue to have food jags (when she only wants to eat a particular food).
- Like to help prepare food.
- Be more influenced by her peers.

## How can I teach my child healthy eating behaviors?

- Eat meals together as a family.
- Keep in mind that you are responsible for what, when, and where your child eats. Let him decide whether to eat and how much.
- Offer a variety of healthy foods, and encourage your child to try different ones.



- Let your child help with food shopping and preparation.
- Do not use food to reward, bribe, or punish your child.
- Be a positive role model—practice healthy eating behaviors yourself.

## How can I make mealtimes enjoyable?

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

- Create a relaxed setting for meals (for example, turn off the TV).
- Let your child leave the table when she has finished eating.

### How much should my child eat?

- Children who are 3 years old may need smaller serving sizes (about 2/3 of a serving) than children who are 4 years old.
- Children who are 4 years old can eat serving sizes similar to those eaten by older family members: 1 slice of bread, 1/2 cup of fruits or vegetables, 3/4 cup of juice, and 2 to 3 ounces of cooked lean meat, poultry, or fish.
- Children who are 3 and 4 years old need two servings of milk, yogurt, or cheese per day.

### What should my child drink?

- Your child should drink about 2 cups (16 ounces) of milk per day. Drinking more than this can reduce your child's appetite for other healthy foods.
- Offer your child about 1/2 to 3/4 cup (4 to 6 ounces) of 100% fruit juice 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.

### How can I prevent my child from choking?

- Children may need to have certain foods modified to make them safer to eat. 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 encourage my child to be physically active?

- Encourage active, spur-of-the-moment play, such as jumping, skipping, and climbing.
- Limit the time your child spends watching TV and videotapes and playing computer games to 1 to 2 hours per day.
- Play together (for example, play ball, chase, tag, or hopscotch). It is a great way to spend time with your child.
- Be a positive role model—participate in regular physical activity yourself.

### 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.