Healthy Eating for Children 2 Through 5 Years Old: A Guide for Parents and Childcare Providers

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The preschool, or toddler, age is a period of rapid growth and development. In the first year of life, a baby’s weight triples and height increases by half. During the ages 2 through 5, growth slows down. A child grows about two to three inches and gains four to five pounds each year. Proper nutrition and opportunities to play and be physically active are critical to ensure that your child grows properly and adopts healthy behaviors for lifelong health. This publication covers different topics that are of interest to parents and caregivers of young children and gives an overview of healthy eating and feeding practices.

MyPyramid. MyPyramid is a guide to healthy eating for healthy individuals age 2 and older. It replaces the Food Guide Pyramid and contains different width and color pyramids representing the food groups and a figure climbing stairs representing physical activity.

As “My” name suggests, MyPyramid is more personalized. Each pyramid contains the same food groups, just different recommended numbers of servings from each food group based on a person’s age, gender, and activity level. MyPyramid is divided into six food groups or bands:

- Grains (orange)
- Vegetables (green)
- Fruits (red)
- Oils (yellow)
- Milk (blue)
- Meat and Beans (purple)

While not a food group, MyPyramid also includes guidelines for “discretionary calories” or “extra” foods.

A wide range of energy intake is recommended for preschoolers because each child differs in metabolism, appetite, growth rate, and physical activity pattern. (See Table 1.) In general, the range of calories recommended for 2- through 5-year-old children is 1,000 to 1,600. One child may need only 1,000 calories per day, while another child may need 1,600 calories (or even more) per day to grow and develop normally. Younger and less active children typically need fewer calories and amounts than older, active children. It is important to remember that MyPyramid is a general guide and not a prescription for the types and amounts of foods that should be eaten. Young children naturally know how many calories they need – or how much they should eat. However, parents, childcare providers, and others can teach them to ignore what their body signals tell them about being full or hungry. So, try to follow your child’s cue, do not be pushy, and give your child plenty of time to eat ... don’t rush.

Young children are naturally good at determining how much to eat.
Table 1: Dietary Recommendations for Children 2 through 5 Years Old

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Group</th>
<th>Range of Daily Amounts from Each Food Group*</th>
<th>Serving Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grains</td>
<td>3 – 5 ounces or equivalent (oz equiv)</td>
<td>1 oz equiv = 1 slice of bread, 1/2 cup of cooked pasta or rice, 1 cup of ready-to-eat cereal, 1 small (6-inch) corn or flour tortilla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>1 – 2 cups</td>
<td>1/2 cup = 1/2 cup of raw or cooked vegetables (like carrots, corn, broccoli, squash, collards, cucumbers, potatoes, tomato sauce), 1 cup of raw leafy greens, 1/2 sweet potato, 1/2 ear of corn, 1/2 cup of tomato or vegetable juice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit</td>
<td>1 – 1.5 cups</td>
<td>1/2 cup = 1/2 cup of fruit (like applesauce, grapes, strawberries, chunks of pineapple), 1 cup of 100% fruit juice (like orange), 1/4 cup of dried fruit (like raisins), and 1/2 banana, apple (small), orange, peach, or pear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>2 – 3 cups</td>
<td>1 cup = 1 cup of milk (including flavored milk), 1 cup of yogurt (including frozen yogurt), 1 cup of pudding, 1 1/2 ounces or 2 slices of natural cheese (like cheddar, Swiss, mozzarella), and 2 ounces or 3 slices of processed cheese (like American)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat and Beans</td>
<td>2 – 5 ounces or equivalent (oz equiv)</td>
<td>1 oz equiv = 1 ounce of meat, poultry, or fish, 1/4 cup of cooked dry beans, 1 egg, 1 tablespoon of peanut butter, or 1/2 ounce of nuts or seeds (like peanuts or sunflower seeds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oils</td>
<td>2 – 5 teaspoons</td>
<td>1 teaspoon = 1 teaspoon of vegetable oil, mayonnaise, or margarine and 1 tablespoon of salad dressing (with no trans fat). This group does not include solid fats; those are considered part of “discretionary calories.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discretionary Calories</td>
<td>165 – 132 calories</td>
<td>Discretionary calories are any foods or drinks in the diet that are “extra” and add calories or saturated/solid fat. These may include: added sugar (to cereal or tea or milk, like chocolate milk), honey, or syrup; gravy and sauces; candy, chocolate, soda, sweet tea, and desserts; higher fat options like french fries (instead of pretzels), whole milk or ice cream (instead of non-fat milk or frozen low-fat yogurt), bacon or sausage (instead of baked chicken breasts), and biscuits or croissants (instead of bread); butter; and even bigger portion sizes and more food from a food group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These amounts are based on 1,000 – 1,600 calories and are not meant to be prescriptive. It is always important to listen to a child’s cues about if he or she is hungry or full. The lower amounts are for the lower end of the calorie range and the upper amounts for 1,600 calories.

**Picky Eaters.** Growth is usually slow and steady between the ages of 2 and 5, but there may be times when growth is sporadic; “growth spurts” occur. Food and energy intakes for preschoolers often follow the growth patterns of children – picky or finicky during slow growth and large appetites during growth spurts. Being picky or finicky is normal for preschoolers and may occur many times during these ages. “Food jags” are also common. This is when children refuse to eat foods that they once liked or will only eat one or two foods over and over again. Some other reasons for this may include a smaller appetite, desire for attention or control, or just being tired. The best way to handle these is to focus on your child’s good eating patterns and positive behaviors and to not let food become an issue. With time, most children get over these issues. So, continue to offer a variety of foods with many colors, textures, and flavors. Make food fun, interesting, and enjoyable for kids. Offer one of your child’s favorite or “jag” foods at each meal or snack and introduce new foods one at a time. Include your child in menu planning, grocery shopping, and food preparation (if safe and appropriate). Avoid forcing a child to eat and preparing separate foods or meals for the child. Do not scold, threaten, or bribe your child. Finally, try to be a role model by eating a variety of foods along with your child.
Getting My Child to Eat Fruits and Vegetables. Fruits and vegetables contain many nutrients and other properties such as fiber and phytochemicals that are critical to a preschooler’s growth and development. A person’s eating habits are established as early as 2 to 3 years old. In other words, if a child eats a diet rich in vegetables at a young age, he or she is more likely to eat vegetables as an adult. The same is true for fast foods, soda, etc. So, increasing your child’s fruit and vegetable intake is an important goal not only for short-term health, but long-term. Some foods have to be offered 8 to 10 times to a child before the child will even try the food! Begin with offering one new fruit or vegetable at a time, and keep offering it. Introduce a small taste first, and let your child spit it out if needed. Usually vegetables are a bigger challenge than fruit since most fruits are naturally sweet and children like sweet foods and drinks. Try cutting and presenting vegetables in fun ways, like diagonally. Add a dip like low-fat ranch dressing or seasoned yogurt. Be persistent and try again until you have a variety of fruits and vegetables that your child will eat. Have your child go to the store with you and pick out a vegetable or fruit to try. Be sure to have everyone eat fruits and vegetables during the meal or snack, including yourself, for positive role-modeling.

Portion Sizes. In general over the past few decades, portions sizes of foods fed to children have increased. To prevent overfeeding your preschooler, put only a small portion of food on your child’s plate. In other words, give only a “kid-friendly” portion size of a food, snack, or drink – not the same size you would offer an adult. Usually, younger children need about half the portion of an adult. Your child’s appetite will guide the need for more food, and your child can ask for more to eat if still hungry. The MyPyramid table shows the portions needed for the whole day. Portion or serving sizes at each meal or snack should add up to the amounts recommended for the day. Be sure not to exceed the oils and discretionary calories for a day.

Offer kid-friendly, not adult, sizes so children learn what is an appropriate portion.

Snacks. Children have small stomachs even though, at times, they may have big appetites. Snacking is a good way to help children consume the energy and nutrients – like vitamins A and C and iron – that they need, especially if they are physically active. Snacks are not meant to be an excuse for indulging. For example, french fries, sodas, cookies, candy bars, donuts, cakes, and sweetened drinks (like fruit drinks or sweet tea) are not the best choices for snacks. Some examples of healthy snack choices include: whole-grain breads, cereals, and crackers; vegetable sticks and pieces with dip; whole fruit, applesauce, fruit chunks, or dried fruit such as raisins; low-fat milk, string cheese, or yogurt; peanut butter; and 100% juices. Many of these foods can be combined such as low-fat yogurt with fruit or cereal and crackers and cheese. Remember that some of these foods may present a choking hazard in preschoolers, so adult supervision is needed when children are eating. You do not have to give your preschooler snacks, but be sure to let your child’s appetite and growth pattern decide if snacks are needed or not.

Choose healthy portions, foods, and drinks when planning a snack for your child. Consider whole-grain crackers, fruit or vegetables, and low-fat cheese or yogurt.

Healthy Drinks. The best choices for drinks for kids are water, non-fat or low-fat milk, and 100% juice. The number one source of sugar in today’s American diets is non-diet soda or soft drinks. Young children really do not need soda. Soda should only be considered a
“treat,” not a regular habit. Water, milk, and 100% juice are the best options. Water quenches thirst, milk is a good source of calcium and vitamin D, and juice can help your child get his or her fruit and vegetables. Be sure to read the label carefully when buying fruit juice. Look for the “juice” on the label; fruit “drinks” have a small amount of fruit, but usually have a lot of sugar added. Also, some juices are better options than others. Apple juice, for example, does not contain many vitamins— whereas orange, peach, pear, and grapefruit (bitter, but good) are good sources of vitamin C.

Soda should not be offered to young children. Offer water, low-fat milk, or selected juices instead.

**Weight Management and Weight Loss for Children.** Weight-loss diets are not appropriate for preschoolers. Keep in mind that children grow and develop at different rates during these young years and may appear smaller or larger than their peers at any point in time. Encourage healthy eating and physical activity. Provide appropriate food choices and portion sizes for meals, snacks, and drinks. Also offer opportunities for your child to engage in a variety of physical activities both individually and as a family. If you are concerned about your child’s weight or size, talk with your family doctor or pediatrician.

**Dietary Fat.** Most experts recommend, that starting at age 2, a person should consume a diet low in fat. Too little fat in the diet can lead to delayed growth and development. But, most American children consume too much fat, which is associated with overweight, not to mention long-term health consequences. Trading high-fat foods and beverages for low-fat ones is a smart choice. For example, whole milk should be replaced by non-fat or low-fat milk and French fries with baked potatoes or pretzels. The way foods are prepared can also change the amount of fat eaten. For example, fried chicken usually has more dietary fat than roasted or grilled chicken. Use MyPyramid to help gauge how much oil and extra, discretionary calories your child is getting in his or her diet.

**Dietary Sugar.** Sugar is found naturally in fruit and is added to many foods, including breakfast cereals and fruit drinks. Sugar is not harmful to most children, but the foods that contain high amounts of added sugar should be limited and used sparingly. Many foods that contain added sugar are “energy-dense” but “nutrient-poor.” This means they have a lot of extra calories but few nutrients like vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Make healthy meal and snack choices by avoiding foods and drinks with added sugar.

**Dietary Salt/Sodium.** Iodized salt is important in a child’s diet because it has iodine, a nutrient that supports normal growth and development. But, too much salt is not helpful and does not make a child grow faster or bigger. Most fresh foods are naturally low in salt. Limit processed foods, such as canned soups and vegetables; vending machine snacks; and cured, salted, and pickled foods, which are concentrated in salt. Limit the use of table salt. Again, taste preferences are established at an early age – if a child becomes accustomed to salty foods, he or she will continue to want them.

**Vitamin Supplements.** Vitamin and mineral deficiencies in American children are very rare, so vitamin and mineral supplements are not usually needed. Sometimes, a vitamin and mineral supplement may be needed for a child for a short period of time. Talk to your physician or pediatrician if you think that your preschooler may need a vitamin or mineral supplement. An adult vitamin and mineral preparation should never be given to a child. If you give a vitamin and/or mineral supplement to your child, be sure to:
• check that the expiration date has not passed (check the bottle);
• limit the amount of vitamins and minerals in one pill or tablet to no more than 100% of the child’s Dietary Reference Intake (DRI) for age;
• provide no more than the recommended number of pills or tablets (usually just one) in any day;
• keep all supplements out of the reach of all children;
• choose supplements without herbs; and
• provide healthy food choices to your child. Supplements should not “replace” a healthy diet.

Physical Activity. Physical activity is important for healthy bodies – bones, muscles, heart – and healthy minds. Fewer children are fit and active than in the past. Children spend more time in front of televisions and computers and less time moving their bodies. Inactive children, when compared with active children, weigh more and have higher blood pressure. They may be more disruptive too. It is important that you as a parent or childcare provider give a child plenty of time to play and be active alone, with you, and in a group. Any physical movement can count for kids:

• walking
• soccer
• swimming
• dodge ball
• jumping rope
• biking
• stretching
• raking leaves
• making a snowman
• taking the stairs
• throwing a ball or Frisbee™

Go on a walk. Dance together. Be silly and jump around. Create little obstacle courses in your house. Consider buying fun toys or equipment that require your child to be active as presents for your child. Offer a family challenge.

Family Mealtimes. Have you ever seen a little boy pretending to shave or a young girl plodding along in high heels and carrying a large purse? These preschoolers are trying out roles. Preschoolers learn about being firefighters, doctors, waiters, chefs, police officers, and other roles by watching, playing, and pretending. They also learn about healthy eating by watching and doing. Meal times are a great time to teach your preschooler about eating healthy foods. Eating with the family or having family-style meals can be fun!

When families eat together or when childcare centers offer family-style meals, children tend to eat more healthy foods and spend more time talking with each other. Use mealtime to:

• teach your child how to make healthy food choices by offering variety of nutritious foods that have lots of colors, textures, and tastes.
• model good eating behaviors. Children eat what they see others eating at meals and snacks. When foods and beverages are used as rewards or punishments, children begin to attach negative or positive thoughts and feelings to foods.
• get your child to help with tasks. Preschoolers want attention and they want to help. Make simple meals and give the child a task to complete.

Preschoolers need for snacks and meals to be provided at regular times. Serve meals and snacks when they are hungry but not “starving” and when they are alert and calm. Talk at the table and enjoy the meal!

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