

Parents sometimes worry that their toddler is not eating enough healthy food. It can help to remember that:

- **parents decide what food to provide—children decide how much to eat**
- **if you provide healthy food, your toddler will eat well whatever they choose**
- **toddlers need less food in their second year as they are growing more slowly. They have small stomachs so need to eat small amounts often.**

Try to keep meal times relaxed and happy, and avoid battling with your toddler about food.

Toddlers and eating

Feeding toddlers can be hard for parents. Toddlers are more independent in their second year and may want to control what they eat. They don't want or need as much food as they are growing more slowly. There are also more interesting things to do than eat!

Sometimes toddlers are 'fussy eaters'. They may refuse food or not want to try new foods. Some have food 'fads' when they want to have the same foods over and over. Be patient with them.

If they don't want healthy food it's best not to offer unhealthy foods such as chips or sweet biscuits.

If you are worried about what your child eats talk to your doctor or other health professional. Regular checks of their height and weight will help you know if they are growing well.

Parents decide what food to provide. Toddlers decide how much to eat.

Toddlers are good at knowing when they are hungry and when they are full.

Let their appetite guide how much they eat.

Role of parents and children

It is up to parents to decide what food and drinks they will provide for their children. It is up to children to decide what and how much they will eat.

If you provide a variety of healthy food and drinks for your toddler, you know that whatever they choose will be nutritious.

Children are good at knowing when they are hungry and when they are full. This skill can easily be lost if children are forced to eat or told to finish everything on their plate. They may learn to keep eating even when they have had enough. This can lead to weight problems later.

At meal times

- Turn off the TV, put toys away and pets outside so children can focus on the meal.
- Eat together as a family so your toddler can enjoy family time and see others enjoying a range of foods.
- Give your toddler small amounts of a new food at first. Try giving it with a food you know they like. It can take 10 times or more before toddlers will accept a new food.
- Be patient. If your toddler refuses food, try not to react. They can learn it's an easy 'button' to push! Take the food away without comment.
- Try giving your toddler the main part of their evening meal earlier before they get tired, or make lunch their main meal. They can have a small amount with the family later.
- Put newspaper on the floor and a big bib on your toddler. They are still learning to feed themselves and it can be messy. The more they practice the sooner they will learn. Encourage their efforts.



ACT
Government

Community Services

THIS GUIDE AND OTHERS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE

www.parentlink.act.gov.au | now every parent can be well connected

At meal times *continued*

It can help to:

- have some fun family rituals such as pancakes for Sunday breakfast—toddlers are more likely to enjoy foods they link with fun
- have a friend over for a meal—this may encourage toddlers to eat
- make meals ahead of time—single serves of tuna mornay or other casseroles freeze well
- vary where and how you serve the food—for example, a picnic in the garden or put food in the centre of the table and everyone helps themselves

encourage an interest in food. Talk to your toddler about food, for example when you are shopping. Involve them in preparing meals. Let them do simple tasks such as stirring food. They can help grow food at home too.

What not to do

It is best to avoid:

- threats, scolding, rushing or bribery
- sitting at the table for a long time
- comparison with other children
- tricks or games to induce eating
- offering a special food such as ice cream as a reward, or telling children they can't have it. Both will make the food more desirable
- saying 'if you eat all your vegetables you can have dessert'. This makes dessert more desirable than vegetables which isn't the best message for children. If you do have desserts make sure they are healthy such as fruit or milk puddings. Give small serves
- insisting that food is eaten. It is best if children's appetite guides how much they eat, and they stop when they are full.

Never force a child to eat. It can cause choking and make them dislike that food.

Learning to feed themselves is often a messy business for toddlers. If you don't like mess, put newspaper on the floor and a big feeder or bib on your toddler. The more practice they get in doing it for themselves, the quicker they will learn to feed themselves well.

What should toddlers eat?

Toddlers should eat a variety of nutritious foods every day.

- **Vegetables:** At least two child serves per day, for example 1 cup salad and ½ cup cooked vegetables.
- **Fruit:** At least one child serve per day, for example 1 banana or 1 slice melon.
- **Dairy foods:** At least three child serves per day, for example 1 small tub yogurt, ½ cup custard and ½ cup milk.
- **Lean meat, fish, poultry, eggs, legumes:** At least two child serves per day, for example 1 thin slice meat and 1 egg.
- **Breads, cereals, rice, pasta:** At least four child serves per day, for example 1 slice bread, ½ cup cooked rice or pasta, 1 breakfast biscuit and 1 small pancake.

Don't worry if your child doesn't eat all of these every day. Their appetite varies each day depending on how active they are or if they are tired or unwell.

Toddlers have small stomachs – about the size of their fist. They need to eat small amounts often, for example 3 small meals and 2–3 snacks each day. Offer small serves and remove uneaten food without comment.

Foods such as biscuits, chips, cordial and soft drinks should only be offered occasionally, for example at parties. Don't be tempted to buy the 'junk food' children see on TV ads. Have plenty of healthy options in the house.

It's best not to have 'junk foods' in the house. If children can't see them, they are less likely to ask for them.

Example menu

Breakfast	1 wholegrain breakfast biscuit with ½ cup milk or 1 piece wholemeal toast with margarine and spread.
Mid morning	1 piece of fruit (cut up) or 4 small crackers.
Lunch	½ cup baked beans with one slice bread or 1 sandwich with ham or cheese, grated carrot, tomato.
Mid afternoon	Small tub of yoghurt or slice of fruit bread.
Dinner	1 cup pasta with bolognese sauce and ½ cup vegetables or 2 thin slices roast meat (cut up), ½ cup mashed potato and vegetables.
Snacks	Small tub yoghurt or custard with fruit.
Drinks	Tap water and up to 2–3 drinks milk (no more than 500mls) or 2–3 breastfeeds.

Food ideas

Breakfast

- Wholegrain cereals, for example porridge.
- Scrambled egg on wholemeal toast or crumpet.
- Pancakes with fruit and yogurt.
- Toasted fruit bread or muffin.
- Rice cakes with smooth peanut butter, avocado, mashed banana, yeast spread or cheese.

Lunch

- Vegetable and bean soup with a wholemeal bread roll.
- Wholemeal toasted sandwich with tuna and creamed corn or baked beans or ham and tomato.
- A lunch box with cherry tomatoes (cut in half) lettuce, cucumber, green beans, egg, cheese cubes and a small bread roll.
- Pasta salad with chicken, 3 bean mix, vegetables.
- Plain or flavoured tin of fish with a bread roll, tomato and grated carrot.

Dinner

- Toddlers should be eating modified versions of the family meal.
- 2 thin slices roast meat (cut up), ½ cup mashed potato and pieces of steamed broccoli, carrot and pumpkin.
- 1 cup pasta and bolognese sauce and ½ cup mixed vegetables.
- Stir fry vegetables and meat and ½ cup noodles or rice.

Snacks

- Fresh or tinned fruit (in natural juice) or small tub yogurt.
- Softened, lightly steamed vegetable sticks, for example carrot, celery, green beans. Add a low fat dip such as tzaziki or hommus.
- Cheese cubes or sticks and sultanas.
- Wholemeal pikelet or scone with margarine and jam.
- Fruit toast or English muffin lightly spread with margarine, or peanut butter.
- Wholemeal bread, toast, crackers or rice cakes lightly spread with peanut butter, mashed avocado or banana, yeast spread, cottage or ricotta cheese. Cut bread or toast into fingers.
- Small can baked beans or spaghetti.
- Hard boiled eggs.
- Home-made biscuits/muffins. Reduce the amount of fat or sugar, add wholemeal flour, rolled oats, dried or fresh fruit or grated vegetables.

Toddlers have small stomachs. They need to eat small amounts often, for example 3 small meals and 2 to 3 snacks each day.

Drinks

Water

Plain tap water is the best drink for everyone including children. It's cheap, has no added sugar or flavourings and helps prevent tooth decay. Most children enjoy water if they get used to drinking it early.

Milk

- Milk is an important drink for children.
- Toddlers can fill up on milk and have less appetite for other foods.
- Five hundred mls per day is plenty.
- It's best to give milk in a cup, not a bottle to help prevent tooth decay.
- Breastmilk provides health benefits for toddlers well into their second year of life.
- Breastfeeding may continue for as long as the mother and child wish.
- Children aged 1 to 2 years need full cream milk.
- Reduced fat milk should be encouraged for children over two years.
- Special 'toddler milks' are not needed.

Other drinks

- If you give children juice, mix it with water.
- Limit to one small glass each day with a meal.
- Limit cordial and soft drinks to special occasions.
- Don't give children tea, coffee, sports drinks, energy drinks or alcohol.

Set a good example.

Let your toddler see you enjoying healthy foods and drinking water.

Safe eating

Children under 4 years are at risk of choking on hard foods, as they don't have the back teeth needed to chew food well.

- Always sit children down to eat. Do not give food or drink when they are running, playing, laughing or crying.
- Stay close and watch children while they eat.
- Encourage children to eat slowly and chew well.
- Cook, mash or grate hard fruit and vegetables, for example apples, carrots.
- Do not give foods that are tough and chewy, for example some meats.
- Cut small round foods in half, for example grapes, cherry tomatoes.
- Remove skins from sausages, frankfurts. Cut into small pieces.
- Remove seeds, stones, pips or bones, for example from fruits, fish.
- Do not give corn chips, popcorn, nuts, hard or sticky lollies, hard crackers.

Contacts

Child and Family Centres (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
healthdirect Australia (free health advice line, staffed by registered nurses)	24-hour	1800 022 222
Maternal and Child Health	8am–5pm Monday–Friday	6207 9977
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.eatwelltas.com.au/PDFs/Startthemrightbook.pdf	<i>Start them right—A parent's guide to healthy eating for under 5s</i> (2008) Department of Human Services, Tasmania
www.nutritionaustralia.org	Nutrition Australia
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	For parenting guides including: Living with toddlers, Milestones, Tantrums
www.raisingchildren.net.au	Covering topics for parenting newborns to teens

This guide's content has been produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network, and adapted by the ACT Government to reflect the application to laws of the Australian Capital Territory.

© Women's and Children's Health Network Inc,
Government of South Australia.
Revised 10/11

Published by ParentLink
Community Services Directorate
GPO Box 158
Canberra ACT 2601

T 13 34 27
F 6205 0968
E parentlink@act.gov.au