

A guide for parents

Toddler nutrition and fussy feeders

The key to healthy eating for toddlers is variety. No one food can give them every nutrient they need, and a wide range of food tastes and textures experienced at this stage will help ensure they have a healthier diet as they grow older.

A healthy diet is one made up from a mixture of the five different food groups shown below -

- **Starchy foods** - Every toddler meal should be based on starchy foods such as rice, pasta, potatoes, bread, chapatti, cereals, yam or plantain. Starchy foods should be offered at some snack times too.
- **Fruit and veg** - Some sort of fruit and/or vegetables should be included at each mealtime. The target should be five portions per day with as many different colours of fruit and veg chosen as possible.
- **Protein** - Aim for two to three servings of 'protein' foods such as meat, fish, eggs, beans or pulses each day.
- **Dairy** - Toddlers should be having three servings a day of dairy products such as milk, yogurt or cheese. Toddlers from one year onwards should be drinking about 360ml milk per day.
- **Fats or sugar** - Foods that are high in fat and/or sugar can be a valuable source of the extra energy that toddlers need, but should only be given in limited quantities as they can displace other foods rich in important nutrients.



During the toddler phase, there are a few simple things that parents need to remember -

- Offer children a variety of nutritious foods at planned meal and snack times – and if possible eat with them and use it as an opportunity to talk about different foods and why they are good to include in the diet
- Plan meals and snacks at regular times - Having set meals and snack times can help children develop good eating patterns and teach them good food behaviours
- Don't overfeed – try and pick up on their cues for when they are hungry or full. Babies and young children generally have ways of telling you when they are hungry and know when they've had enough to eat. Don't force babies and young children to finish off all the food that you offer them if they don't seem to want it.
- Try and be a positive role model for a healthy lifestyle - Children like to imitate adults, and will learn many of their attitudes about healthy (or unhealthy) eating and physical activity from you. Be enthusiastic about trying new foods yourself. Spend time playing actively with them and don't just sit and watch. When children notice that you are trying new foods and playing actively, they are more likely to do the same.
- Stay calm and don't let mealtimes become a battleground or a be used as a reward
- Hunger varies over time and that, as growth slows down around baby's first birthday, appetite can also decline for a short while.

Food refusal and faddy eating

Refusing to eat certain foods can mean different things for different children. It may just be their way of getting your attention or exerting their new-found independence on the world around them. It may just be that they don't like the taste or texture of a particular food at a particular time, but this doesn't mean they will always refuse the same food. For some foods you may need to offer it more than ten times before they'll happily eat it.



Most toddlers by 18 months old will have entered a 'neophobic phase' during which they will be reluctant to try new foods, but the key to getting through this stage is to keep offering the toddler new foods. Even though these new tastes and textures may be rejected at first, most toddlers will get through this neophobic phase unscathed.

Another cause of food refusal may be that a toddler is drinking too much fluid or eating too many snacks between mealtimes. This may be filling them up with the calories and leave them with no appetite for meals. Alternatively, if parents are forcing their toddler to finish all the food on their plate, it can increase toddler's anxiety towards particular foods or if food is used as a reward they may begin to prefer sweet over savoury and reject the latter.

Here are a few tips to help parents get through this phase -

- Stay relaxed, don't rush mealtimes, be patient
- Eat with your baby whenever possible
- Offer mainly familiar foods, but try new foods in small quantities too
- As they get older, let your toddler be involved with shopping and preparing meals so they feel more in control
- If a food is refused, don't force them to eat it. Withdraw it without any fuss, and then try it again another time
- Praise your child when they have completed a meal, but don't scold them when they don't.

Extreme food refusal

Some children find it hard to move out of this phase and will only eat a limited range of food. This can be worrying for parents and it is important that you reassure them that it is just a phase. Make sure their child is eating enough calories for growth and if their diet is very poor consider vitamin and mineral supplements.

Advise parents to follow these tips in cases of extreme food refusal:

- Never force toddlers to eat disliked foods, just gently encourage them
- Don't withhold accepted foods in exchange for disliked foods (this can discourage toddlers from eating anything and may lead to weight loss if they refuse to eat more foods)
- Avoid putting disliked and liked foods together in case they refuse everything
- Avoid long gaps between meals, offer small snacks in between.



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