



Food guide for preschoolers, 1-6 years

During the years before school the child grows more independent and becomes able to clearly communicate his/her will. The child is curious and happy to learn anything new. On the other hand, the child may be reserved and shy away from new things, even be afraid of them. Eating is one of those things where changes occur between infancy and childhood. A baby or toddler who needs to be fed develops into a child with good eating skills.

Family meals and a varied diet

It is the adult's responsibility to make sure that the child has regular meals and is given healthy food which is suitable to the child's age. The child decides how much to eat. Even a baby joins the family for meals. Regular meals with the family creates security and a daily routine. A child learns about balanced meals and healthy eating habits by watching others.

The sense of taste develops early in life. Taste preferences are a complex mix of inherited characteristics and learned habits, and these are difficult to change at a later stage. Therefore it is important for a young child to learn to eat a variety of healthy foods and to become familiar with a wide range of tastes for the life ahead.

The adult decides what and when to eat, the child decides how much to eat.

"A child eats what he likes. He likes what he knows. He knows what is offered frequently."

Susanna Anglé

Fear of new foods and flavours, food neophobia, is typical for children 2-3 years of age. A child who has been a good eater may suddenly turn very picky. You can encourage the child to try new foods - at their own pace. The child may at first look at the food, smell it, investigate it and feel it. Good results have been attained by letting the child use all their senses to become familiar with the food. Only then should you encourage the child to taste it, and having done so the child should be given genuine praise. The learning of new tastes requires regular repetition several times. A child needs to taste a new food about 10 – 15 times before he/she becomes accustomed to its flavours. It is important to offer the child a variety of foods and flavours, even if the child did not eat everything that is offered. When a preschooler is allowed to freely choose what to eat, the choice will be something already familiar to the child. These foods tend to become favourites, which leads to a narrow diet and possibly an increased reluctance to try new foods.

Variation in appetite and problems with eating

A child's appetite and energy needs fluctuate daily and periodically. This depends on growth rate, daily routine, outdoor activity, sleep and health condition. Children are very different, and you should avoid comparing children of the same age, in particular so that the children can hear it. Replacing meals with snacks or drinks and having an irregular rhythm for meals can easily disturb a child's delicate regulation of appetite and lead to eating problems. A healthy child does not suffer from eating less sometimes. The adult should not disturb the child's natural regulation of appetite by forcing the child to eat more or by insisting that the plate should be cleared. A preschooler's pickiness or eating problems are often related to the child's normal growth and development of independence, which may be in conflict with the adult's wishes. In such cases the child may be increasingly fussy or refuse to eat to gain attention. A picky eater's meals should be as varied as possible. Do not force your child to eat when he/she does not want to. Forcing the child to eat may cause the child to dislike food and meals.

Is he/she eating enough?

Small, children need frequent meals, because they cannot eat large amounts at one time. Regular meals are the basis of a healthy diet. Long intervals between meals may lead to unnecessary snacking between meals or uncontrolled eating, which may result in overweight. Both children and adults are recommended to eat every 3-4 hours, which is about 4-6 meals every day.

A regular meal pattern:



The plate model helps in composing balanced meals for children and adults. Whole-grain bread and something to drink is added.

⇒ ½ plate of colourful vegetables, ¼ plate of fish, meat or vegetarian protein and ¼ plate of potatoes, rice or pasta. The child has a smaller plate than the adult.



Average amounts of food for preschoolers and adults:

Food category	Preschooler portion size	Adult portion size
Vegetables, fruit, berries	5 own handfuls, i.e. 250 g daily	5-6 portions, i.e. 500 g daily
Potato	added to meals according to taste	added to meals
Cereal products and cereal-based side dishes (1 portion = slice of bread, 100 ml rice/pasta/porridge)	At least 4 portions daily, depending on age and energy requirements	Men approx. 9 portions Women approx. 6 portions
Milk products	A sufficient daily amount for a preschooler is 400 ml plus 1 slice of cheese	500-600 ml plus 2-3 slices cheese daily
Meat, fish and eggs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fish • Poultry • Red meat, cold cuts and sausages • Eggs • Legumes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least 2-3 times per week At least 2-3 times per week No more than 250 g per week No more than 2-3 eggs per week, especially if high cholesterol runs in the family Protein source for main meals every week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least 2-3 times per week At least 2-3 times per week No more than 500 g per week No more than 2-3 eggs per week, especially if high cholesterol runs in the family weekly
Food fat	1,5-2 tablespoons of vegetable oil or 4-6 teaspoons of vegetable margarine	2-3 tablespoons of vegetable oil or 6-8 teaspoons of vegetable margarine
Nuts, almonds and seeds	15 g per day	30 g per day
Food that contains coconut oil or palm oil	Not daily	Not daily



Good food for children

Vegetables, berries and fruits are the basis for our diet, and a variety of them should be available at every meal. Vegetables contain vitamins and minerals, and they are good for our health in other ways, as well. Potatoes contain a moderate amount of carbohydrates, several minerals and vitamin C. Potatoes are also an environmentally-friendly choice.

Whole-grain products contains many vitamins and minerals and fibres that are good for our health.

Milk products are rich in high-quality protein, calcium, vitamin B₂, vitamin B₁₂, iodine and zinc. Two thirds of the fat in milk is saturated fat. Low-fat and no-fat milk products are a good choice for children. High-protein milk products are not recommended for daily consumption by children.

Meat, fish and eggs are good sources of protein. The amount and quality of fat in them should be observed. Fish are a good source of health fats. It is recommended that you alternate with variety of species. The maximum recommended amount of processed meat, including sausages and cold cuts, is 250 g per week, and they should not be eaten daily. Meals which include legumes are recommended at least once a week.

Vegetable oils and vegetable margarines contain unsaturated fat, which is the recommended type of fat. Nuts, almonds, seeds and avocado are also good sources of unsaturated fat.

Water is the drink of choice when you are thirsty. Children should get accustomed to the taste of water at an early stage. The intake of liquid should be equally regular as meals.

Sugar should be used in moderation. The most part of children's intake of sugar comes from hidden sugar in sweetened foods. The desire and habit to eat sweet foods is something you learn. Naturally contained sugar in food ingredients needs not be avoided.

For children, good food choices and eating habits combined with play and activity ensure normal growth and development . Normal body weight is easier to maintain when the amount of passive time is reduced and the child gets enough sleep and rest. The goal of good habits is to ensure the child's health and well-being.