



How children develop – 3-5 years

Food and nutrition

Every child is an individual.

Every child develops at their own pace, usually through the same stages and milestones, and in the same order.

Children grow and learn continually, but not in a smooth flowing pattern. Sometimes they practise skills for quite a while and seem as if they will never move on. At other times they learn many skills very quickly.

This fact sheet is a general guide to child development. If you have any concerns about your child's development, seek advice from your child health nurse or doctor.

Eating habits

By now your child should be eating and enjoying healthy meals and meal times with the rest of the family. Children do not need special foods. Offer the same meals as the rest of the family as much as possible.

If you need to, just modify the texture of the food you are eating (e.g. cut up meats and serve small pasta pieces that are easy for your child to pick up).

This is a critical stage for laying the foundations for healthy eating. Children begin to socialise with food. They begin to understand the broader role of food, and begin to be influenced by marketing, and foods used as bribes, rewards, treats, and the power of refusal. This is also the age at which children begin to eat outside the home, for example at childcare and kindy. So it is an important time for parents to encourage, support and model healthy eating.

Parents often become concerned that their child is not eating enough and frustrated that everything they prepare is refused. As a parent you are responsible for what your child is offered to eat, when the food is offered (a 3-5 year old may need 5-6 small meals a day) and making meal times pleasant. Your child is responsible for how much, or even whether, they eat.

Planning meals

How much food is eaten at this age varies from child to child and from day to day and is influenced by growth and activity levels. These serving sizes and amounts can be used as a guide to feeding your 3-5 year old each day. Some serve sizes are different to those commonly used for adults.

Breads, cereals, rice, pasta and noodles

3 to 7 servings daily

(one serve = 2 slices of bread, or 1 cup cereal, or 1 cup cooked rice, pasta, noodles).

This includes all kinds of wholemeal, wholegrain and white bread, cereal, rice, pasta, noodles, such as pikelets, crackers, raisin bread, dry biscuits, and fruit buns.

Vegetables and legumes

2 servings daily

(one serve = 1/2 cup cooked, or 1 cup salad).

Encourage your child to taste and try a wide variety of both raw and cooked vegetables. This is important in helping your child develop healthy eating habits.

Fresh vegetables are best, but frozen and canned are good alternatives.

Your child may like the same vegetable in one form (for example, raw grated carrot) but not another (such as cooked diced carrot).

Fruit

1 serving daily

(one serve = one medium piece e.g. an apple or banana, or two small pieces, e.g. apricots, kiwi fruit)

Fresh fruit is best but frozen, canned and dried are also good alternatives.

Fruit juice is not an alternative to fresh fruit.

Milk, yoghurt and cheese

2 servings daily

(one serve = two cups or 250ml of milk, custard or 200g tub yoghurt or 40g cheese or cheese slice).

Children do not need special yoghurts or custards.

Reduced fat dairy foods are suitable for this age group.

Meat, fish, poultry, eggs, nuts and legumes

2 servings daily

(1/2 serving = 1/2 cup mince or 35-50g meat or 2 tablespoons kidney beans or other legume, or 40-60g fish, or 1 egg, or 1 tablespoon peanut paste).

Red meat is an excellent source of iron. Try to include it often.

Nuts are not recommended for young children as they could cause choking. Use only smooth nut pastes.





How children develop – 3-5 years

Food and nutrition

Some points to remember

Choose foods low in salt.

Eat only moderate amounts of sugar and foods containing added sugar, particularly lollies, sweets and drinks.

Care for your child's food: prepare and store it correctly.

What to drink

Choose water or milk as a drink. Fruit juice, cordials and soft drinks are not necessary.

How to help your child eat a nutritious, healthy diet

- Plan regular meal and snack times – children need structure, routines and limits.
- Make meals and snacks look appealing – use a range of colours, and shapes. Food should also be easy to chew and handle. Involve your child in choosing and preparing food.
- Encourage your child to eat with you and your family. Children learn by imitating the people around them.
- Do not force your child to eat. Respect that the child may have certain likes and dislikes and give them some choice in selecting food, e.g. let the child choose between two types of fruit or sandwich fillings.
- Be consistent with how you handle food refusal.
- Avoid substituting uneaten meals for other foods. “Treating” children with unhealthy food because you are worried they are not eating only makes them less likely to eat healthier foods. Only buy and offer healthy foods.
- Do not use food as a bribe for behaviour.
- Set aside 20-30 minutes for meal times and 10-12 minutes for snacks.

Your child's healthy height and weight should be a guide to their diet. If you are concerned about your child's diet, talk to your child health nurse or your doctor.

For more information

If you would like more information on your child's development or you are concerned about your child, contact your local child health nurse.

You could also ask at your local library for books on child development.

Acknowledgement

This fact sheet is the result of input and effort from many health professionals in Queensland. Their assistance with the content is greatly appreciated.

