Feeding Children Ages 1 to 5
A GREAT START TO LIFE

Early childhood is a critical learning period. From the time children are born, they develop eating habits that will influence their diet and their relationship with food for a lifetime.

From around the age of one, after the introduction of solid food, children’s meals should generally resemble those of the rest of the family. Here is some practical information to guide you along the amazing adventure of eating together as a family.¹

¹ The recommendations in this brochure are intended for children who do not have any specific health or dietary concerns.
INTRODUCTION

I’M HUNGRY!

You hear those words all the time! But what exactly is hunger?

Hunger occurs when the body needs energy (food) so that it can continue to function at its best.

Children express hunger in different ways. Depending on their age, they may chew on their hands, be irritable, get a stomach-ache or have trouble concentrating. And if they can talk, they will say, again and again, "I'm hungry!"

Hunger varies from one day to the next and even from one meal to the next. It can be influenced by a variety of factors, such as growth spurts, activity level, tiredness and mood.

Most children can naturally determine how much food they need to eat by listening to their body’s signals. And they are very good at letting you know when they have reached satiety.

When they are no longer hungry, children may:

- eat more slowly than at the start of the meal;
- turn their head away at the sight of food;
- play with or hide food;
- push their plate away;
- say they are no longer hungry or that their belly is full.

Which means they’ve had enough.

Pay attention to all of these signs. Sometimes children’s fullness signals can be a bit difficult to figure out, but they are your best guide during meal and snack times.
“PICKY” EATERS!

Young children are very curious by nature and should always be encouraged to explore new foods. The sooner kids are introduced to a wide variety of nutritious foods, the better the chances they will accept and enjoy them.

Set a good example. “Look, Dad is eating the bell pepper and he likes it! You should try it too.” Children learn through imitation. If the adults at the table aren’t eating any vegetables, the children will notice and probably refuse to eat them as well.

Golden rules

Encourage children to try a bite, without pressuring them or making any negative comments.

Set a good example. “Look, Dad is eating the bell pepper and he likes it! You should try it too.” Children learn through imitation. If the adults at the table aren’t eating any vegetables, the children will notice and probably refuse to eat them as well.

Offer new foods regularly. Take advantage of moments when children are feeling well, happy and hungry. They may need to be exposed to the same food 10 to 15 times or more before they try it! The first few times, they might simply look at it, poke it with their fork, smell it or put it to their lips for a few moments.

Present foods as what they really are. Don’t pretend a zucchini and raisin muffin is a chocolate chip muffin. Avoid disguising foods or lying about what’s in a dish. Children need to know what they’re eating to learn to enjoy a variety of foods.

For young children, food is also a way of expressing their independence – one day they like a food, the next day they don’t. This behaviour is a part of normal development and can last for varying lengths of time.
Patience and perseverance are key words to keep in mind when it comes to children's development! Children need time to learn to walk and talk, likewise, they need time to learn to like food.

EATING TAKES TEAMWORK!

Team up with children during meal and snack times by sharing responsibilities.

**How much**
- **PERSON IN CHARGE:** Child
- **MISSION:** Listening to their body to determine how much they should eat.

**When**
- **PERSON IN CHARGE:** Adult
- **MISSION:** Setting the meal and snack schedule.

**What**
- **PERSON IN CHARGE:** Adult
- **MISSION:** Choosing the foods and beverages to offer.

**How and where**
- **PERSON IN CHARGE:** Adult
- **MISSION:** Creating a safe and pleasant eating environment.

The ultimate mealtime mission.

Sticking to your own responsibilities.
How much help children listen to their body’s signals.
I DON’T WANT ANY MORE!

When children are about two years old, they start to show more independence and want to feed themselves. It is also at this age that their growth rate begins to slow down, which may make them seem less interested in food. Let them decide for themselves how much they will eat.

By listening to their body’s hunger and fullness signals, they are perfectly able to meet their needs. After all, they’re the only ones who can tell if they’re really hungry.

DID YOU KNOW?

Regardless of age or weight, putting a child on a diet by limiting the amount of food offered to them is not recommended. Doing so may adversely affect their natural growth rate and their attitude toward food or it may cause them to worry about their weight. Instead, help them listen to their body’s signals.

You can’t go wrong this way! If you are concerned about a child’s weight, a pediatrician or family doctor can analyze any changes in weight and height and, if needed, suggest that you meet with a registered dietitian specializing in childhood nutrition.
WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Instead of using these tactics, encourage children to try the food served, without any pressure, guilt, negotiation, punishment or reward. “You may not have liked it before, but maybe your tongue will like it today” or “See how much your sister likes her carrots? You should try them too!”

Create a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere during meal and snack times. This is how you will teach children to develop a healthy relationship with food and encourage them to listen to their hunger and fullness signals.

NEGOTIATION, PUNISHMENT OR REWARD?

Negotiation

“I made dinner with love and you won’t even eat it!”

Guilt

“Eat a little – it’ll make me happy.”

Guilt

“You’re two – eat two more bites!”

Negotiation

“Eat your meat if you want to go play!”

Negotiation

REWARD

“You didn’t eat your carrots, so no dessert.”

Punishment

Sometimes children don’t want to eat what’s on their plate. When this happens, adults sometimes play with children’s emotions or feelings of guilt. Though they mean well, adults can end up blurring the children’s hunger and fullness signals, which can negatively affect the relationship children will have with food. Here are examples of phrases to avoid:

A REWARD FOR BEING GOOD?

To reward children for following instructions, sharing a toy or peeing on the potty, choose a reward other than food, such as reading them a story, giving them a hug or letting them play a bit longer.

Food is intended to fuel the body. Associating it with reward encourages children to eat when they are not necessarily hungry.
DESSERT, PLEASE!

Dessert often completes a meal and is a good opportunity to offer children fruit and dairy products, foods they don't always get enough of. Sweeter desserts, such as cakes and cookies, can be served on occasion. In moderate quantities, they are part of the joy of eating and of a balanced diet.

It's a good idea for kids and adults to leave room for dessert. It's not unusual to no longer want any more of your main course, but still be hungry. A child who leaves room for dessert shows that they are listening to their hunger and fullness signals. So even if children eat very little or none of their main course, still offer them dessert. Serve them one portion, like every other family member.

If a child is still hungry after they have finished their dessert, offer them more of the main course.

NO NEGOTIATING!

If children view dessert as a reward for finishing their meal or eating their vegetables, they will place a higher value on it. They will want their dessert whether they're hungry or not. Generally, children who grow up in an environment where dessert is not used to negotiate or as a reward will have the same attitude toward a piece of cake as a bowl of fruit: they will eat until they are full – and that's it.
When
WHEN ARE WE EATING?

Routines make children feel safe. So always serve meals and snacks at about the same time, if possible.

Despite their small stomachs, children have big dietary needs. They should therefore eat small amounts of food multiple times a day. Aim for three meals and two or three snacks each day.

Schedule snacks halfway between meals. To avoid spoiling children's mealtime appetites, offer snacks about two hours before the next meal. When snacks are incorporated into their routine, children are also less likely to nibble.
Offer children a variety of nutritious foods at each meal.
Children ages 1 to 5 have high nutrient needs, but small stomachs, so they can eat only a small amount of food at a time. Offer them a variety of nutritious foods at each meal from the three categories of Canada’s Food Guide, as shown in the illustration of the balanced plate on the next page. Note that the foods shown are only examples. Let your imagination inspire you!

This illustration shows that the ideal plate should contain one-third vegetables, one-third protein foods and one-third whole-grain foods. Some foods, such as fruit, milk and yogurt, are presented around the plate because they are often eaten as a complement to the meal or as a snack. That said, they are still part of the three food categories.

1 A balanced plate for children ages 1 to 5 is an adaptation of Figure 4 from: Ministère de la Famille, Gazelle et Potiron : cadre de référence pour créer des environnements favorables à la saine alimentation, au jeu actif et au développement moteur en services de garde éducatifs à l’enfance, 2014, p. 47.
WHAT

A BALANCED PLATE FOR CHILDREN AGES 1 TO 5

Vegetables and fruits
Focus on colourful vegetables and fruits

Whole-grain foods
Choose foods that contain fibre

Protein foods
Offer a variety

Let children drink water as often as they like
Vegetables and fruits contain so many nutrients. In general, the more colourful their flesh, the more vitamins they contain.

Add variety with seasonal fruits and vegetables. Stock up for when the first snowflakes fly! Even frozen, vegetables and fruits are rich in vitamins and minerals.

Cut fruits and vegetables in a variety of ways to pique children’s curiosity: julienned, cubed, grated, etc.

Serve fruits fresh, cooked or canned.

Choose varieties without added sugar or other sweeteners.

Offer vegetables cooked, raw* or in soup. If canned, choose those that contain little or no added sodium.

Serve vegetables (and fruits!) with a nutritious yogurt dip.

Mix up your mashes: sweet potatoes, celery root (celeriac), carrots, parsnips, cassava, etc.

For snacks, offer children fruits and vegetables they can eat easily with their hands (e.g., thin carrot sticks, cucumber slices, a clementine, a banana or a pear).

*Learn about reducing the risk of choking on pages 28 and 29.
Grain products provide energy to the body and brain and keep us feeling fuller longer. Young children also tend to like them. Be sure to vary the type of grain and try to pick whole-grain products because they contain more fibre.

Pro tips

- Go half-and-half:
  - Use a mixture of whole-wheat flour and white flour for breads, muffins or pastries.
  - Try two-toned sandwiches: a slice of brown bread and a slice of white bread to help children get accustomed to the taste of whole-grain bread.

- Choose whole-grain breakfast cereals that are low in sugar.

- Opt for breads whose first ingredient is a whole-grain flour such as whole wheat.

- Opt for homemade pastries, muffins, cereal bars and cookies over store-bought products because homemade tend to be less sweet and higher in fibre.

To ensure an adequate iron intake, offer iron-fortified cereals up to the age of two. You can offer cereals in the form of hot prepared cereal or add them dry to your meatballs, muffins, cookies and pancakes by replacing half the flour with the same amount of cereal.
Protein foods, such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy products, legumes and nuts, help with the development of muscles and organs in addition to providing a feeling of fullness. Beyond protein, these foods provide other essential nutrients for children's development and health.

Varying the protein foods on their plate is key to reaping all the benefits.

**PROTEIN FOODS VARIETY IS KEY**

Omega-3s are essential fats, meaning the body cannot produce them, so they need to come from food sources, such as fatty fish (e.g., salmon, trout, mackerel and sardines). White fish and other seafood may also contain some omega-3s, but in smaller amounts.

Store-bought breaded fish is not the most nutritious choice because it often contains more breading than fish.

Frugal tip: choose canned fish such as herring, sardines, wild salmon and light tuna.

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**FOOD**

**Fish and seafood**

**KEY NUTRIENT**

**Omega-3**

**MAIN ROLE**

Contribute to brain development.

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**Takeaways**

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**Pro tips**

1. Offer fish and seafood in homemade sandwiches, pâtés or fishcakes.
2. Children tend to like baked fish fillets.
3. Serve fish and seafood with a white sauce or broiled with cheese on top.

* Key nutrients may also be found in other foods, but in smaller quantities.
Milk, yogurt and cheese are good sources of calcium. Milk and some yogurts also provide vitamin D, which promotes calcium absorption.

Contrary to popular belief, dairy products do not increase mucus production when you have a cold, the flu or asthma. It is the fat in these foods that lines the mouth and throat when we eat them that makes us feel more mucousy. If the sensation bothers the child, try lower-fat dairy products when a child is getting over an illness.

Pro tips

- Make these dairy foods more appetizing by serving milk in fun glasses or yogurt with a colourful spoon.
- Add vanilla or ground cinnamon to hot or cold milk.
- Offer small portions, more frequently.
- Prepare milk-based recipes such as smoothies, puddings, tapioca, creamed vegetable soups, white sauces and mashed potatoes.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Key nutrients may also be found in other foods, but in smaller quantities.
High-fibre foods add variety to the menu and often provide an opportunity for young children to discover new foods.

Many products are made from these foods, such as tofu, hummus and nut butters (including peanut butter). They contain varying amounts of fibre.

Tofu and legumes are easy to add to all kinds of recipes. They are affordable and good to have on hand.

To limit the discomfort and gas sometimes caused by legumes, gradually introduce them into the diet. The discomfort is temporary and decreases as the body adjusts.

**FOOD**

**Legumes, nuts and seeds**

**Takeaways**

- Opt for half-and-half: ground meat + legumes or tofu.

- Use these foods in dishes that children already know and like.

- Add them to dishes that have less protein, such as vegetable soups and salads.

- Increase the nutritional value of certain recipes, such as cookies and muffins, by adding a legume purée, silken tofu, nuts or seeds (ground or chopped).

**Pro tips**

**KEY NUTRIENT**

**Fibre**

- Promotes intestinal health and prevents constipation when combined with good hydration.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

- Fibre promotes intestinal health and prevents constipation when combined with good hydration.
Avoid categorizing foods as “good” or “bad” or calling them “junk food.” Talking about food this way creates the notion that some foods are forbidden. And anything that isn’t allowed is always more appealing. Instead, indicate that some foods, such as vegetables and fruits, whole-grain products, and protein foods, should be eaten more often.

Pro tips

It can be difficult for young children to eat meat or poultry because it can be hard for them to chew it.

Try these ideas to make eating meat easier for children!

- Offer cuts that are very tender or that have been cooked for a long time in broth.
- Cut meat into small pieces to make it easier to chew.
- Serve meat in the form of meatballs or meatloaf—the ingredients in these dishes create a softer texture.
- Serve meat with a sauce so that it is less dry in the mouth.

STAY POSITIVE!

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Takeaways

- Red meat contains more iron than poultry does. In eggs, it is the yolk that contains the most iron.
- Iron from animal sources is absorbed much better than iron from plant sources (e.g., dark green vegetables, legumes, tofu, iron-fortified grain products).

Iron carries oxygen in the blood.

FOOD
Meat, poultry and eggs

KEY NUTRIENT*
Iron

MAIN ROLE
Iron carries oxygen in the blood.

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MAIN ROLE
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To meet young children’s high dietary needs and tide them over until the next meal, offer them a snack consisting of one source of carbohydrates and one source of protein.

**EXAMPLES OF FOODS THAT CONTAIN CARBOHYDRATES:**

- Fruit (fresh, frozen, as sauce or canned)
- Vegetables
- Baba ghanoush (roasted or grilled eggplant purée)
- Whole-grain crackers
- Homemade muffins (sweet or savoury)
- Homemade cereal bars
- Bread (sliced, tortillas, pita, naan)
- English muffins
- Oatmeal or cream of wheat
- Whole-grain breakfast cereals
WHAT

The possibilities are practically endless!

Let your imagination inspire you! To mix things up, you can also serve snacks that combine several foods, such as smoothies (frozen berries + yogurt) or whole-grain pita wedges and hummus. You can even make these simple recipes with the kids!

EXAMPLES OF FOODS THAT CONTAIN PROTEIN:

- Spreads made from chicken, tofu, fish, eggs or legumes
- Boiled eggs
- Tapioca or rice pudding
- Milk
- Breast milk
- Yogurt
- Cheese
- Peanut, soy or other nut butters
- Nuts and seeds
I’M THIRSTY!

Children are more likely to become dehydrated than adults because they are focused on playing and don’t think about drinking. In the summer, out in the sun, they are also more susceptible to heat stroke. So hydration is very important.

WATER

Let children drink water as often as they like.

MILK

Milk provides hydration, but also energy and many nutrients essential to children’s development. Before age two, offer whole milk (3.25% MF) because the fat it contains is essential for brain development and growth. After age two, provided a child has a varied diet, partially skimmed milk (2% MF) can be offered instead of whole milk.

BREAST MILK

Its composition is unique, adapting to the needs of young children as they grow. Health Canada, the Canadian Paediatric Society and several international health organizations recommend breast milk until the age of two years or more.
**PLANT-BASED BEVERAGES**

Fortified soy beverages plain or "original", may be offered at age two, unless otherwise advised by a health-care professional.

Because of their low protein and fat content, plant-based beverages such as rice, almond, oat and coconut are not recommended for children under five.

**OTHER BEVERAGES**

Because of their low nutritional value, sweetened beverages such as soft drinks, fruit juices, fruit cocktails and punches, and sports drinks should not be part of children's daily diet.

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**Allergies and intolerances**

By the age of one, most children have been exposed to most of the foods their family consumes. But it is a good idea to stay vigilant, because a bad reaction to a food can occur at any time.

If your child reacts after eating a food, tell your doctor. Only a doctor can determine the nature and severity of the reaction. For example, a food allergy could be life threatening, whereas an intolerance may cause only temporary discomfort. It is essential to get a clear diagnosis so as not to unnecessarily exclude a food or group of foods.
Families that eat together generally have better eating habits.
EVERYONE AT THE TABLE

The environment and the way children eat are important.

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT CONducive TO Eating Together AS A FAMILY

Choose a bright, well-ventilated and pleasant space that fits the whole family.

+ Respect children’s eating pace.

+ Avoid all distractions, such as television, books, toys and electronics.

+ Discuss pleasant topics. Avoid resolving conflicts during mealtimes.

+ Stay calm and do not pressure children to eat. Take advantage of mealtimes to relax and enjoy being together as a family!

Why not mix things up once in a while? Activities such as a picnic in the living room, breakfast in bed or a snack in the forest can pique kids’ curiosity and make meal and snack times interesting.

TOO YOUNG TO GET INVOLVED?

No way! Early childhood is the ideal time to introduce children to cooking. Involving children in food preparation will make them proud of what they’ve made, and they are more likely to sample their own creations. What’s more, people who know how to cook have better eating habits, so it is extremely important that children learn to cook.

Ready to give it a try? Go to cuisinonsenfamille.ca (in French) for lots of tips and tricks to get kids involved in the kitchen. You will also find kid-tested-and-approved recipes and activities.
HOW AND WHERE

MAKE SAFETY A PRIORITY!

CHOKING

Choking on food is one of the leading causes of accidental death in children under the age of four. Given the small size of their esophagus, preschool-aged children are at higher risk of choking when they eat.

TO REDUCE THE RISK OF CHOKING ON FOOD

Make sure children always eat sitting down in a calm environment.

Ensure that children are supervised by an adult while eating.

Do not allow children to eat in the car.

Do not let children talk, walk, run or play with food in their mouths.

Encourage children to take small mouthfuls and chew food properly.

Avoid foods served on toothpicks or skewers.

Avoid riskier foods such as popcorn, chips, hard candy, chewing gum and ice cubes until children are older.
+ Preparing foods safely

**HARD VEGETABLES** (e.g., carrots, turnips, celery)
- Cook until the vegetable is soft.
- Cut into small pieces.
- Grate, if served raw.
- Blanch (cook lightly).
- Cut in strips.
- Grate, if served raw.

**FRESH FRUIT** (e.g., apples, peaches)
- Cut ripe fruit into pieces.
- Grate firmer fruit.

**DRIED FRUIT** (e.g., dates, figs, apricots, raisins)
- Chop and add to recipes.

**ROUND FRUIT** (e.g., grapes, large blueberries, cherries, strawberries, cherry tomatoes)
- Cut in half or in quarters, depending on size.
- Remove pits, if needed.

**LEGUMES**
- Crush chickpeas or cut them in half.

**NUTS, SEEDS AND WHOLE PEANUTS**
- Grind and add to recipes.

**PEANUT OR NUT BUTTER**
- Use smooth varieties only.
- Spread a thin layer on warm toast.

**SAUSAGES**
- Cut lengthwise, then into small pieces.

**FISH**
- Remove all bones.
- Serve in small pieces.

**MEAT AND POULTRY**
- Remove all bones.
- Serve in small pieces.

**PREPARING FOODS SAFELY**

- Ages 1–2
- Ages 1–4
- Ages 2–4
HOW AND WHERE

FOOD-BORNE ILLNESS

Eating safely also means preventing food-borne illness. The immune systems of children ages five and under is still developing. Their stomachs also produce less gastric acid than those of adults. That is why they are more susceptible to harmful bacteria, viruses and parasites that may be found in foods.

SOME FOODSPOSE A GREATER RISK.

Avoid serving them to children under five:

- Raw or undercooked meat and poultry (e.g., tartare)
- Raw or undercooked fish and seafood (e.g., smoked/cured salmon, sushi)
- Raw or undercooked eggs and egg-based products (e.g., cake batter, homemade salad dressing)
- Unpasteurized milk products (e.g., raw milk or cheese made from raw milk)
- Unpasteurized fruit juice
- Unwashed melons (especially cantaloupe)
- Sprouts or shoots (e.g., alfalfa, radishes, bean sprouts)

Food-borne illness usually results from the improper handling, preparation, storage, preservation or cooking of food. So adopt good hygiene practices before, during and after food preparation.
The team of Registered Dietitians at Dairy Farmers of Canada would like to thank the following people for reviewing the content of this brochure:

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