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For Better Living  
Feeding Young Children

Our food habits begin to develop the day we are born and each one of us learns at an early age which foods we like and dislike. Young children learn by watching others and this applies to their eating habits as well. A child often looks to someone else to model the appropriate behavior. Through the foods we serve and the examples we set, parents and care givers can help children form sound eating habits.

### **Tips to Follow**

Serve foods that are flavorful and colorful. Consider the flavor of the foods you serve. Generally, young children reject strong flavors, although many children like pickles and some spicy sauces. Children also do not like their foods to be too hot or too cold.

Children have a natural interest in color. Green, orange, yellow, and pink are some of the more popular colors that children like. Presenting food on colorful plates or in colorful ways can help make eating fun.

Encourage participation in meal preparation. Young children often have a limited number of foods they like and their likes can change often and unexpectedly. If they feel like they have a part in selecting, preparing, and serving foods, they're more likely to try different foods. If you have a garden, involve your children in picking food from the garden.

Offer children choices in foods. Give children some control over what they're eating by offering them choices. For example, ask which vegetable they would like for supper and follow through on their suggestions.

Provide small portions to encourage appropriate food habits. To accommodate varying appetites, it is best to offer small portions and encourage preschoolers to ask for second helpings, if desired. Because preschool children are not growing as rapidly as they were as infants, their appetites tend to decrease. Also, due to growth spurts and competing interests, a preschooler's appetite varies from day to day.

Plan regular meal and snack times and eat together. Because of their small stomachs and short attention spans, preschool children like to snack. Most preschoolers eat four to five snacks or meals each day. Plan snacks as you do meals, as snacks can be an excellent way to get needed nutrients into a child's diet.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans provide a framework for planning nutritious meals for children. Here are some ways to incorporate the Dietary Guidelines into meal planning.

Offer and eat a variety of foods. Offering a variety of foods, prepared in different ways, makes meals and snacks more interesting for children.

Serve plenty of grain products, vegetables, and fruits. Grains such as breads, cereals, pastas, and rice as well as vegetables and fruits add color and variety to the diet. These foods are also good sources of complex carbohydrates, dietary fiber, and a number of vitamins and minerals.

After the age of two, families should think about the amount of saturated fat and total fat that's in their child's diet. The fat in most foods contains a blend of saturated, polyunsaturated, and monounsaturated fats. Saturated fats usually are solid at room temperature. Examples of foods that are high in saturated fats include animal products like meat and lard, and dairy products such as whole milk, cream and butter.

Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats are liquid at room temperature. Corn and safflower oils are good sources of polyunsaturated fats. Canola and olive oils are high in monounsaturated fats. Replacing solid, saturated fats with liquid, unsaturated ones will be healthier for you and your children.

Changes to reduce the level of fat in meals must be practical and acceptable. For example, if you're used to buying whole milk, buy a half gallon of whole and a half gallon of 2% milk and mix the two together. Slow change is more likely to be accepted and adjusted to than a dramatic change.

The amount of fat you use in meal preparation can easily be reduced without losing much of the food's appeal or flavor. For example, if a muffin recipe calls for 1 cup of oil, you can easily reduce the amount of oil to 3/4 cup without changing the flavor and quality of the end product.

Moderate the use of sugar and foods high in sugar. There are two main reasons to offer children sugar in moderation. First, sugars and foods high in sugar supply calories but may be limited in vitamins and minerals. Second, too much sugar can lead to tooth decay.

### **The Nutrition Facts Food Label**

Now that we know how to plan healthy meals, how do we know that what we're buying is nutritious? The Nutrition Facts food label can help.

This label tells you the total calories in one serving of the food and the number of calories that are coming from fat. It also tells you about the different types of fats in the food. It tells you about the vitamin A, vitamin C, iron and calcium content of the food; these are all nutrients that are important for children. The nutrition label tells you about the cholesterol, fiber and sodium in that food.

Labels can assist meal planners in making more knowledgeable purchases based on the nutrient content of each food. Look for nutrient content claims such as "free," "low," or "reduced" on the front of the label to help identify foods that are low in calories, fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium.

Take the time to read food labels. You can use labels to help you plan healthy meals and budget your intake of calories and fat over several days.

### **Chocolate Peanut Butter Haystacks**

1 milk chocolate candy bar (1.55 ounces), broken into pieces  
1/4 cup reduced-fat peanut butter  
1 cup Fiber One bran cereal

In a microwave-safe bowl, combine the candy bar and peanut butter. Microwave at 50% power for 1 minute; stir. Microwave at 50% power 10 - 15 seconds longer or until candy is melted. Stir until smooth. Stir in cereal until evenly coated. Drop by rounded tablespoonfuls onto waxed paper. Let stand until set, about 20 minutes. Yield: 8 serving.