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## what should children eat?

What children eat affects their health both now and in the future. They need a balanced diet to grow properly, keep healthy and fight off illnesses. A nutritious diet means your children will:

- have plenty of energy
- feel bright and alert
- concentrate better at school
- suffer fewer illnesses
- have clear skin, bright eyes and shiny hair.

Changing children's eating habits not only improves their health but also their behaviour, mood and learning success at school. Primary schools that belong to the government's national healthy schools programme where pupils are better fed and get more exercise, make greater academic progress and outperform others in national tests in reading, maths and science.

Studies at Oxford University show that diet may even help prevent and manage developmental conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism spectrum disorders as well as mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Studies in the USA (carried out in 2005) have shown that banning school vending machines and providing nutrition education and healthier food options results in better behaviour and academic standards among 5–10 year olds. After one year exclusions had fallen by 80 per cent and school test scores in maths and English had shot up.

The earlier you teach children healthy eating and exercise habits, the better. A healthy diet now means a healthy diet in ten years' time. Children don't 'grow out of' poor eating habits – they continue eating the foods they're used to being given. An overweight teenager has a 70 per cent chance of becoming an overweight adult.

## healthy eating *for* kids

### **You are their role model!**

Kids learn eating and exercise habits from their parents. A 2005 study at Arizona State University, USA, showed that parents who don't monitor their children's diets are more likely to have children who grow up to become overweight or obese.

With two million overweight and 700,000 obese children in the UK, we could be facing a looming epidemic of obesity. The Chief Medical Officer for England, in his 2002 Annual Report, describes childhood obesity as a 'public health time bomb'. Children are more likely to do as you do, so being a good role model will encourage good habits. A 2004 study carried out by University College London found that the more often parents ate fruit and vegetables, the more likely it was their children would have a high intake. Eating a lot of high-fat, salty or sugary foods conditions a child's tastes to those types of food. Unless you make an effort, children will continue to choose bland processed food and reject fresh food such as fruit or vegetables, even though fresh food has stronger flavours. You can't blame them for choosing and eating what they are accustomed to.

**It's not always easy to persuade children to make healthy choices but try to stick to the 80/20 rule. This means eating a balanced diet around 80 per cent of the time, while the other 20 per cent of the time children are free to enjoy other foods they want.**

### **What are children eating?**

Snacking, grazing and eating on the hoof are the norm for many children as they are moving away from regular mealtimes. According to a 2001 British Medical Association survey, a quarter of British children eat a breakfast of crisps and sweets before they arrive at school in the morning. One in five children aged between 11 and 16 years miss breakfast altogether. The National Diet and Nutrition Survey of British Schoolchildren in 2000 revealed that the most commonly eaten foods among 4–18 year olds are white bread, crisps, biscuits, potatoes and chocolate bars. Fewer than half the children ate green leafy vegetables. This survey, the largest of its kind, looked at the diets of 1701 children over seven days and found that:



- Children are eating a mere two portions of fruit and vegetables per day (five portions daily are recommended).
- One in five children eat no fruit at all.
- More than 90 per cent of children are eating too much saturated fat.
- Most children eat twice the maximum recommended amount of salt.
- Half of all girls aged 11–18 years eat diets grossly deficient in iron and magnesium.
- Children are eating more than the maximum recommended amount of sugar.

It's when these poor eating habits are coupled with inactivity – watching television, playing computer games and getting around by car all the time – that the trouble really begins. Too many calories and too little exercise will cause an unhealthy increase in body fat.

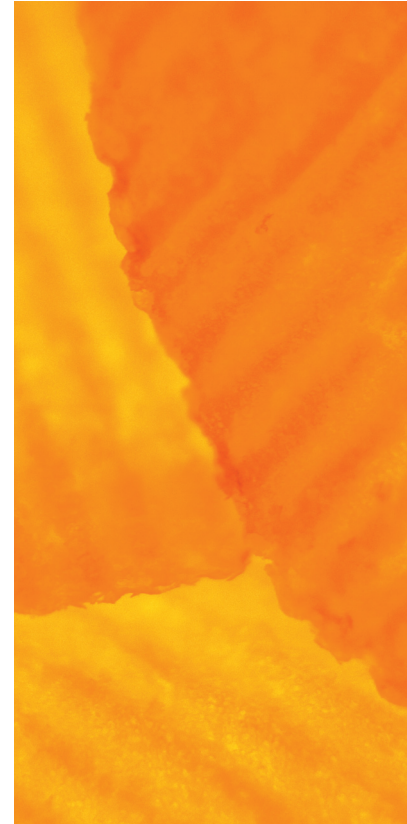
### **Why should you change what children eat?**

If children eat a healthy diet now, and participate in physical activity from an early age, they are more likely to remain healthy and active during adulthood. Children who are used to eating vegetables or walking to school every day (even when it rains) will continue to eat healthy food and see activity as an integral part of their life. Equally, those who graze on a diet of fast food and salty snacks and spend hours glued to the television are setting themselves up for a lifetime of poor eating habits and inactivity.

It's also important to realise that the seeds of certain illnesses, such as coronary heart disease and diabetes, are sown during childhood. Overweight children as young as 10 years old are showing signs of artery damage and suffering from high blood pressure. The good news is that changing children's diets and encouraging them to be more active can prevent health problems in the future.

### **What is a balanced diet?**

Eating a balanced diet is all about eating a wide variety of foods. Your children's diet should provide them with all the vital nutrients needed to keep them fit and well. A healthy diet consists of a balance of protein, carbohydrate, fat, vitamins and minerals.



## healthy eating *for* kids



The easiest way to plan your children's diet is by using the Children's Food Guide Pyramid, shown on page 16. It is loosely based on the nutritional recommendations of the 2005 US Department of Agriculture's Food Guidance System for kids (*see* [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov)). It recommends a diet rich in fruit and vegetables, and including whole grains and healthy fats. It discourages saturated fats, trans fats and refined carbohydrates and tells you how many portions of each food group children should aim to have each day. The foods at the bottom of the pyramid should make up the largest proportion of their diet, while the foods at the top of the pyramid should be eaten in smaller amounts.

Make sure you:

- include foods from each food group in the pyramid every day
- choose a variety of foods from each group
- provide the recommended number of portions from each food group each day
- check the portion sizes suggested on the next page.