

Dietary Guidelines for Children

A healthful diet is necessary for both physical and mental development. To guide you in making decisions for you and your family about eating healthfully, the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services have developed Nutrition and Your Health: Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which provide recommendations for healthy Americans ages two years and older. These recommendations are based on the Dietary Guidelines.

Offer a variety of foods

Offering a variety of foods prepared in different ways makes meals and snacks more interesting for children and makes good nutrition sense.

Everyone needs many different nutrients for good health. Nutrients are in food. The nutrients needed are vitamins, minerals, water, carbohydrates, amino acids from protein and certain fatty acids from fat.

Choosing a variety of foods from the USDA MyPyramid will provide the variety of foods needed for good health. These food groups are: Grains; Fruits; Vegetables; Milk; and Meat & Beans.

Serve meals that help maintain a healthy body weight

An active lifestyle will provide the following benefits:

- Fun and relaxation
- A healthy heart
- Positive attitude
- Strong bones and muscles
- A healthy weight
- Development of motor skills, balance and coordination
- Increased energy
- Improved self-esteem

Offer foods low in saturated fat and cholesterol and moderate in total fat

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans suggest goals of 20 - 35 percent of total calories from fat and less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat for everyone over two years of age. Higher levels of fat have been linked to obesity and certain types of cancer. Higher levels of saturated fat have been shown to increase the risk for heart disease.

At about two years of age, children should be encouraged to choose diets that are lower in fat and saturated fat and that provide the calories and nutrients they need for normal growth. These goals for fats apply to the diet over several days, not to a single meal or food.

Grains, vegetables, fruits, and low fat or fat-free dairy products are the best choices for adding calories when lowering the fat in meals. To increase calories without adding fat, young children will probably have to eat smaller, more frequent meals than older children or adults.

Fats in the diet include margarine, vegetable oils, salad dressings, butter, cream and lard. In general, foods that come from animals are higher in fat than foods that come from plants, but products such as lean meat, nonfat or lowfat milk and chicken without skin have less fat than other animal products.

Most fruits, vegetables and grain products are naturally low in fat. Many popular items, however, such as french fried potatoes, croissants and sweet rolls are prepared with fat.

All fats contain a mixture of saturated and unsaturated fat. Saturated fats are found in the largest amounts in animal products and some vegetable fats such as coconut, palm and palm kernel oils.

Hard margarines and shortenings and foods containing partially hydrogenated vegetable oil are similar to saturated fat and tend to raise blood cholesterol levels.

Dietary Guidelines for Children

Serve plenty of vegetables, fruits and grain products.

Vegetables, fruits and grain products are generally low in fat. They are important because they also are good sources of complex carbohydrates, dietary fiber and other substances in food linked to good health.

Offer and use sugars only in moderation.

Sugars and many foods that contain them in large amounts supply calories but may be limited in vitamins and minerals. They should be used in moderation by most healthy people and sparingly by people with low-calorie needs.

Frequent between-meal snacks of foods such as cakes, chips, crackers and pastries, candies and dried fruits may be more harmful to children's teeth than sugars eaten with regular meals.

Offer and use salt and sodium only in moderation.

Most Americans eat more salt and sodium than they need. Some people may reduce their chance of getting high blood pressure by eating less salt. Since there is no way to predict who will develop high blood pressure, serving foods lower in sodium and reducing or omitting salt during food preparation may help some children avoid high blood pressure when they become adults.

Promote an alcohol- and drug-free lifestyle.

Children and teens should not drink alcoholic beverages. Use of alcoholic beverages involves risks to health and other serious problems.

Activities

- Have a tasting party to introduce new foods or a familiar food prepared in a different way.
- Look for pictures of new foods or foods using different methods of preparation.
- Involve children in planning menus for meals and snacks.
- Develop special menus to highlight foods from different regions of the United States or from different countries.
- Participate in active play time with children such as running games (tag), jumping, musical chairs, follow the leader, throwing and catching games.
- Try replacing high fat foods with lower fat selections. Examples: frozen yogurt or sherbet instead of ice cream; graham crackers instead of cookies; bagels with jelly instead of doughnuts.
- Make instant pudding with skim milk instead of whole milk.
- Take the salt shaker off the table.
- Prepare a Mystery Box or Bag. Place food inside bag or box so the child can't see it and must identify the food by feel. Food also can be identified by odor or taste by having the child close his eyes and smell or eat a small amount.
- Play What Am I? Give the child clues about a food, such as color, taste and texture. Then allow him to guess what it is.

Visit our Web site: www.lsuagcenter.com

Author
Beth Reames, Ph.D., LDN RD
Specialist (Nutrition)
School of Human Ecology

Louisiana State University Agricultural Center
William B. Richardson, Chancellor
Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station
David J. Boethel, Vice Chancellor and Director
Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service
Paul D. Coreil, Vice Chancellor and Director

Pub. 2251-A

(online only)

1/09 Rev.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. The Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.