

CHILD DEVELOPMENT INFORMATION & TIPS SHEET: “EATING & NUTRITION”

General Disclaimer: The following information was compiled for First 5 LA Parent Helpline from reliable sources. It is for informational purposes only and is not intended as medical advice. The information does not cover everything related to the topic and may not apply to all individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Healthy eating and good nutrition are important in young children who grow so much in the first few years of life. This Information Sheet provides guidelines for feeding your baby during her first year. (See the table on pages 4-5). The sections below cover strategies for encouraging smart eating habits, suggestions for helping picky eaters, and foods which can be problematic for young eaters.

STRATEGIES FOR ENCOURAGING SMART EATING HABITS

Good nutrition and a balanced diet help children grow up healthy. Whether you have a toddler or a teen, here are five strategies to improve nutrition and encourage smart eating habits.

- 1. Have regular family meals:** Family meals are a comforting ritual for both parents and children. Children like the predictability of family meals and parents get a chance to catch up with their children. In addition, family meals offer the chance to introduce your child to new foods and to act as a role model for healthy eating. Research has shown that children who take part in regular family meals are also more likely to eat fruits, vegetables, and grains; are less likely to snack on unhealthy foods, and less likely to smoke, use marijuana, or drink alcohol when they are older.
- 2. Serve a variety of healthy foods and snacks:** Children, especially younger ones, will eat mostly what is available at home. That’s why it is important to control the foods that you serve for meals and have on hand for snacks. Follow these basic guidelines:
 - Work fruits and vegetables into the daily routine, aiming for the goal of at least five servings a day. Be sure you serve fruit or vegetables at every meal.
 - Make it easy for your child to choose healthy snacks by keeping fruits and vegetables on hand and ready to eat. Other good snacks include low-fat yogurt, peanut butter and celery, or whole-grain crackers and cheese.
 - Serve lean meats and other good sources of protein, such as fish, eggs, beans, and nuts.
 - Choose whole-grain breads and cereals for more fiber.
 - Limit fat intake by avoiding deep-fried foods and choosing healthier cooking methods, such as broiling, grilling, roasting, and steaming. Choose low-fat or nonfat dairy products.
 - Limit fast food and other low-nutrient snacks, such as chips and candy. But don’t completely ban favorite snacks from your home. Instead, make them “once-in-a-while” treats, so children don’t feel deprived.
 - Limit sugary drinks (soda, sports drinks, and fruit-flavored drinks). Serve water and low-fat milk instead.
- 3. Be a role model by eating healthy yourself:** The best way for you to encourage healthy eating is to eat well yourself. Children will follow the lead of the adults they see every day. By eating fruits and vegetables and limiting less nutritious snacks, you’ll be sending the right message.
- 4. Avoid battles over food:** It’s easy for food to become a source of conflict. Well-intentioned parents might find themselves bargaining or bribing children to eat healthy food. A better strategy is to give children some choices, but limit the foods available (for example, *would you like applesauce or yogurt for dessert?*). Here are some guidelines to follow:
 - Establish a predictable schedule of meals and snacks. It’s OK for a child to choose not to eat one meal if both parents and children know when to expect the next meal or snack.
 - Don’t force children to clean their plates. Doing so teaches children to override feelings of fullness.
 - Don’t bribe or reward children with food. Avoid using dessert as the prize for eating the meal.

- Don't use food as a way of showing love. When you want to show love, give children a hug, some of your time, or praise.
5. **Involve children in the process:** Most children will enjoy deciding what to make for dinner. Talk to them about making choices and planning a balanced meal. Older children might even be able to help shop for ingredients and prepare the meal.
- In the kitchen, select age-appropriate tasks so your child can play a part. For example, even a young toddler can help to mix the sauce (with supervision, of course). Older children may be able to help measure, mix, and put together food (e.g., put the filling in tacos). And at the end of the meal, don't forget to praise the chef.
 - School lunches can be another learning lesson for children. Brainstorm about what kinds of foods they'd like for lunch or go together to the grocery store to shop for healthy, packable foods.
 - Another important reason to involve children in food choices when they are young is so that they will make good decisions later on about the foods they eat. The mealtime habits you help create now can lead to a lifetime of healthier choices.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PICKY EATERS

Children may need time to get used to the various textures, colors, and tastes of new food. Because young children crave consistency and familiarity (from bedtime routines to afternoon snacks), most of them won't try new foods until you've served them numerous times. Here are some tips for introducing new foods to a picky eater:

- Serve a variety of good foods to your child at each meal. When you do offer a new food, simply place it on your child's highchair tray or plate without making a big deal about it. Keep in mind that it takes several tries before a new food is familiar enough to eat. So be patient.
- Introduce new foods one at a time and in small amounts. Your child will feel more in control and you won't feel like you are wasting food if he doesn't eat it. Offer one new food along with your child's usual foods, and try to offer the new food when you know your child is hungry.
- Use toddler-size portions. A serving of bread for a 1-year-old is only 1/4 slice, and a serving of rice, potatoes, or pasta is only about 2 tablespoons — much smaller than an adult serving size.
- Understand that some children's palates are more sensitive than others, and they simply won't like the texture, color, or taste of some foods.
- Look for ways to boost the nutritional value of the dishes your child enjoys. Put some tuna or ham on his grilled cheese, or meat or tofu in his spaghetti sauce.
- Minimize distractions at the table. Try to make meals relaxed and quiet.
- Don't cater too much to your preschooler's pickiness. While it was fine let your toddler have his cheese sandwiches cut into star or moon shapes, your preschooler is getting old enough to eat without special gimmicks.
- As your child's world expands, her taste in foods might broaden as well. It's not uncommon for children to be more open to new foods when they're away from home, such as in preschool or at a family member's house.

FOODS TO BE CAREFUL ABOUT

Not all foods are safe for your child. Some pose a choking hazard, a few are not good for your baby's still-developing digestive system, and others are potential allergens. (Note: See below for signs of an allergic reaction.) In the first year, be cautious about the following:

- **Citrus:** Citrus fruits and juices (orange, lemon, lime) before age 1 may provoke an allergic reaction, especially if allergies run in your family.
- **Egg whites:** Your baby can eat egg yolks now, but wait a year before giving the protein-rich whites because he may be allergic to them. If you think your baby is at high risk for allergies, delay giving egg whites until 2 years.
- **Honey:** Honey can harbor spores of bacteria which cause a serious illness. Wait until at least 1 year to introduce honey.

- **Peanut butter:** Peanuts are highly allergic for many people (an “allergenic” food). Wait until your child is at least 1 year old before introducing peanut butter. (If you or your mate has peanut allergies, wait until your child is at least 3.) Peanut butter’s sticky consistency also makes it difficult for a young child to swallow safely.
- **Wheat or wheat products:** Most babies can handle wheat — found in many cereals and breads — when they’re about 6 to 8 months old. Wheat is the most common grain allergen, though, so if you’re concerned about allergies, you might want to wait until your baby is 1.
- **Shellfish:** Because it can be highly allergenic, experts recommend excluding shellfish from your baby’s diet until his first birthday. (If you suspect he’s susceptible to allergies, wait until he’s between 3 and 4 years old.)
- **Tree nuts (like pecans and walnuts):** If you think your baby is at risk for allergies, you might want to wait until he’s 3 or 4 before giving him nuts. Otherwise he can probably handle them when he’s 1, as long as they’re pureed. (Whole nuts and pieces of nuts pose a choking hazard.)
- **Cow’s milk:** Stick with breast milk or formula until your child’s first birthday. Why? Your baby can’t digest the protein in cow’s milk for the first year, it doesn’t have all the nutrients she needs, and it contains minerals in amounts that can damage her kidneys.
- **Other potential allergens:** If you’re concerned that your baby may be prone to allergies, you might delay the introduction of other commonly allergenic foods — like corn, soy, chocolate, or anything else you’re allergic to — until your baby is at least 1. Depending on the severity of your allergy and other factors, you may want to wait even longer. Talk to your child’s doctor for help making this decision.
 - *If you’re breastfeeding, avoiding all nuts and possibly eggs and milk in your own diet may help in delaying or preventing allergies in your baby.*
- **Large chunks:** Pea-size pieces of food are safest — they won’t get stuck in your child’s throat. Vegetables like carrots, celery, and green beans should be diced, shredded, or cooked and cut up. Fruits like grapes, cherry tomatoes, and melon balls should be cut into quarters before serving, and meats and cheeses should be cut into very small pieces or shredded.
- **Small, hard foods:** Nuts, popcorn, cough drops, hard candies, raisins, and other small dried fruit and seeds are potential **choking hazards** as your child might have trouble getting them down safely. Also avoid chewing gum and soft foods like marshmallows and jelly candies that might get stuck in your child’s throat. Instead of giving large dollops of peanut butter, spread it thinly on bread or crackers. You can also thin it with some applesauce before spreading it. Avoid letting your child eat in the car since it’s hard to supervise while driving. Finally, if you’re using a rub-on teething medication, keep an even closer eye on your baby as it can numb his throat and interfere with swallowing.
- **Low-fat milk:** Before age 2, give your child whole milk. Your toddler needs the fat and calories of whole milk for growth and development. Once she turns 2 (and if she doesn’t have any growth problems), you can start giving her lower-fat milk if you like.

ALLERGIC REACTIONS

Signs of an allergic or bad reaction to food include: vomiting, diarrhea, rash, swelling, abdominal pain, cough, crankiness, excessive gas, hives, itching, runny nose, shortness of breath, stomach bloating, and wheezing. Symptoms most often show up within a few hours of eating. Call your doctor right away if you think your child may be reacting badly to something she ate.

SOURCES:

The following reliable sources were used in the creation of this Information Sheet. Use of these resources by 211 LA County and by First 5 LA does not constitute a recommendation.

BabyCenter Medical Advisory Board (2004) *Age-by-age guide to feeding your baby*. Retrieved on May 5, 2008, from Baby Center web site: http://www.babycenter.com/0_age-by-age-guide-to-feeding-your-baby_1400680.bc.

BabyCenter Medical Advisory Board (2006) *Foods that can be unsafe for your baby*. Retrieved on May 5, 2008, from Baby Center web site: http://www.babycenter.com/0_foods-that-can-be-unsafe-for-your-baby_9195.bc?print=true.

BabyCenter Medical Advisory Board (2005) *How to Handle a Picky Eater*. Retrieved on May 5, 2008, from Baby Center web site: http://www.babycenter.com/0_how-to-handle-a-picky-eater_9199.bc?articleId=9199&page=1.

Gavin, M. (2007) *Healthy Eating*. Retrieved May 5, 2008, from Healthy Kids web site: (http://kidshealth.org/parent/nutrition_fit/nutrition/habits.html).

[FOR CRA USE] SEARCH TERMS

Nutrition Education *Youth (**LH-270.600**) *(**YB-950**)

Farmers Markets (**BD-240.225**)

WIC (**NL-600.950**)

Breast Pumps (**LJ-500.090**)

Breastfeeding (**LJ-500.100**)

Food Pantries (**BD-180.200**)

Food Stamp Applications (**NL-600.200-22**)

Formula/Baby Food (**BD-180.820-25**)