Healthy Meals, Happy Families!

Family meal times can be enjoyable or like a battle zone. Establishing healthy family food choices takes time. With planning, preparation and encouragement the whole family can enjoy a wide variety of foods together.

- It is a parent’s role to decide which foods to offer children and when to offer food.
- From a young age, children can decide whether they will eat and how much they will eat.

What children need to eat

Children need a wide variety of foods for health and growth.

From birth, breast milk is the preferred source of food and drink for your baby. If breast milk is not available infant formula can give your baby the nutrients needed for healthy growth.

At around six months

Your baby has increased iron needs and you will start introducing a variety of healthy solid foods. First foods will include iron fortified rice cereal followed by smooth vegetables and fruits. Foods should be introduced individually to check your baby’s tolerance; later they can be combined to make more interesting meal combinations. Meat in smooth form can be next and then breads, cereals along with all foods can be graded up to minced consistency to teach your baby to eat new textures.

Soon your baby will progress onto regular family foods with three meals and three snacks a day.

From twelve months

A range of foods needs to be offered from the following groups daily:
- Vegetables
- Fruits
- Breads and cereals
- Meat, fish, chicken, eggs, legumes
- Milk, cheese and yoghurt

Your child’s eating patterns will change with increasing age. As a guide, plan for your toddler to have three main meals with two or three snacks per day. Around primary school age your child will be having the more traditional, three meals a day with top up snacks at recess and after school. Growth patterns and physical activity levels will also change appetite and eating patterns, however making healthy foods available at each meal and snack time will ensure your child is getting all the nutrients needed.

How about drinks?

Water and milk are the best drinks for your child. All sweet drinks such as fruit juice, juice drinks, cordials, sport drinks, energy drinks, flavoured milk, flavoured mineral waters and soft drinks are high in sugar and are not necessary. Sweet drinks can increase the risk of tooth decay, are ‘filling’ and may replace healthier foods and drinks.

Buying healthy family foods

Remember it is your role as a parent to decide which foods to offer your child. This starts with the food you decide to buy or make available for your family to eat. Planning for grocery shopping can help you make the most nutritious and cheapest choices as well as save you time later on:
- make a list for the essential foods and ingredients you need; this helps to avoid filling the trolley with items you do not need
- check local supermarket brochures for specials to help you save
- buy foods in season for the tastiest, freshest and cheapest options
- consider frozen, tinned and dried varieties of foods, especially vegetables and fruits as these may be cheaper, will store easily and be on hand to add to any meals or snacks
- shop locally and try the markets to support fresh foods grown nearby for cheap prices
- look for ‘confectionary free’ check-out aisles to avoid last minute temptation
- don’t forget your green bags or own trolley to reduce environmental cost

Family meal times

Sitting down together as a family for meal times can be a good way of finding quality time together. Even if only once or twice a week, eating together in a relaxed environment can make meal times invaluable. Offer a family meal, starting with small serves. Let your child decide when they are full, allowing them to leave a portion of the meal once tried if they do not like the food.

At mealtimes:
- encourage talking and sharing of daytime activities
- avoid distractions such as television and telephones
- try not to argue about food choices or food left on the plate.

Prepare healthy meal options

Breakfast ideas

Make breakfast the healthy start to your family’s day and be a positive role
Dealing with food refusal and fussy eating

Children shouldn’t be forced to eat certain foods. One of the best things parents can do is to eat and enjoy a wide variety of foods everyday themselves. Children learn best by watching their parents and family, so keep trying; the next time you offer may be the day they decide to try it.

Six key steps to help with fussy eating include:

1. allow children to take part
   plan to take your child shopping on occasions, to choose from the variety of foods available and let them help prepare snacks and meals to eat.

2. enjoyment
   make meal times fun together, focusing on positives and avoiding arguments.

3. presentation
   keep a variety of fresh foods available for an easy, quick snack.

4. increase variety whenever possible
   be creative with family favorite meal and snack options by adding a variety of vegetables or ingredients with new tastes and textures.

5. keep trying
   children need time to learn to enjoy eating a variety of foods, and may need to see a food ten times or more before they are ready to try it. Resist the urge to prepare other foods separate to the family meal, your child may choose to leave certain foods, but needs to learn to accept the meal offered.

6. avoid food rewards
   find fun ways to reward your child. Instead of food, as a reward, try reading a story, playing or stickers.

Avoid boredom eating

We don’t always eat just because we’re hungry. Learn to recognise when your child is hungry compared to when they are bored. Have a list of family activities to do to prevent boredom eating. Activities might include:

- play outside
- read a book
- if old enough, you could go for a bike ride, walk the dog or go for a walk together

Family vegetable patch

A creative way to help your child develop healthy eating habits is to involve them in gardening- planting, growing, nurturing and picking foods.