

## Healthy eating and activity in the primary school years (5–12 years)

Primary school age is the time children start enjoying busy social lives, have pocket money and begin to develop their own interests and lifestyle. Children of this age learn quickly and are influenced by friends and popular trends. This is the perfect time to learn about the importance of healthy food and activity.

### Food needs

The early and middle primary years are ones of slow and steady physical growth. Very low fat or restricted diets are not recommended – a healthy, balanced approach to eating and activity is suggested for all children.

Children need a wide variety of foods for a well balanced diet. Offer a range of foods from the following groups:

- fruits and vegetables
- breads and cereals
- meat, fish, chicken, eggs, legumes
- milk, cheese and yoghurt.

During primary school years, children move to a more traditional eating pattern of three main meals each day. For busy and active children, a 'top up' in between main meals is still important to help keep them alert and 'on the go'. A healthy snack at recess and after school is usually needed. Your child's activity levels influence the amount of food needed.

### Activity

Physical activity is an important part of good health. Being active everyday helps children to:

- maintain a healthy weight
- protect against diseases in later life
- improve concentration

- boost self-esteem and confidence
- improve physical skills
- improve cardiovascular and musculoskeletal health
- provide social opportunities for children to interact, learn, lead and follow.

At primary school age, children are improving basic movements including motor skills, hand and eye coordination and balance. By the middle years of primary school, children can participate in modified sports like 'Auskick' and 'Netta' netball or attend 'kids clubs' with an emphasis on fun rather than competition. However, outdoor free play is an easy, low cost and physically beneficial option for children.

It is recommended school aged children participate in at least one hour – and up to several hours – of physical activity every day. Very few children do 60 minutes of continuous activity. It is more natural and developmentally appropriate for children to do activity in short bursts. Carers and other family members, such as grandparents, can share the responsibility of encouraging children to be active every day outside school. Families should seek out and be aware of low cost activities in the local area.



STRIDE AND  
RIDE

### Reducing inactive time

- Limit screen time, including computer, television and electronic games, to no more than two hours per day.
- No more than 60 minutes should be spent sitting or lying still, during the daytime.
- Walk instead of taking the car where possible.

#### Try to:

- organise some of your child's free time with physical activity around the home and encourage your child to fill other time with play-based activities like skipping, dancing, playing ball or creative outdoor play
- create family rules around how much inactive time is allowed and enforce active time together
- plan active opportunities for the whole family on a weekly basis
- collect active play items, such as a ball, or a small bat to take on family outings
- support your child's activity efforts – watch them play, help them practise and praise their effort, not the result of the activity
- be a role model for your child – be active in your own daily life.

### Family mealtimes

Sitting down to eat as a family is a great chance to spend time together. Take time to eat together and relax at mealtimes, even if only a few times during the week. Try a late breakfast or lunch on the weekend with all the family.

## At mealtimes:

- encourage talking and sharing of daytime activities
- avoid distractions such as television, radio or the telephone
- offer a healthy family meal; allow children to leave an item if they say they do not like the food; do not offer different options to the family meal
- let your child decide when they are full, don't argue about food
- encourage children to help with preparing meals and shopping
- discuss some simple nutrition messages such as 'milk helps keep your teeth and bones strong'.

## Breakfast

It is important to encourage children to eat breakfast. A good night's sleep followed by breakfast in the morning helps children stay active, concentrate at school and not get too hungry during the morning. Be a positive role model and let your child see you eat breakfast. Some great starters for the whole family include:

- a bowl of breakfast cereal or porridge with milk
- slices of grainy toast or fruit bread with spread
- fresh or stewed fruit and yoghurt.

## School lunches

Packed lunches from home are a great way for your child to learn about healthy food and help with preparation. Packaging can sometimes be tricky for little fingers – make sure your child is able to unwrap the food in their lunchbox.

### Some lunch box ideas:

- Fresh or tinned fruit. Dried fruit is sticky and high in sugar, so only offer these occasionally or as part of a meal.
- Try vegetable sticks with dips or a small container with mixed vegetables such as cherry tomatoes, and snow peas.
- Include a variety of breads and fillings. Try bread rolls, flat bread, foccacias, crispbread, rice or corn cakes. Try fillings such as vegemite,

peanut butter, cheese, tuna, egg, cold lean meats, baked beans, grated carrot, avocado and lettuce.

- Include a small drink of water or milk (freeze overnight) wrapped in a cloth in the lunchbox. Fruit yoghurts should stay cool in an insulated lunchbox.
- Cheese and grainy biscuits – either prepackaged or your own homemade version.
- Fruit muffins and cakes are a great way to include more fruit and vegetables. Try sultana, carrot, zucchini, banana or pumpkin.



## School canteen

Many schools have canteens and most children will use them. Schools may have a healthy canteen policy to support children making healthy food choices at school, however, without assistance your child may choose high energy foods, low in nutrients, and often more expensive than food bought from home.

It is best to limit the amount of money to spend at school or shops on the way home. While occasional lollies, chips and take-away foods do no harm, if eaten too often this may result in:

- poor intake of other foods that are nutritious
- high energy intake and the risk of becoming overweight
- high cost compared to homemade snacks and lunches
- increased risk of tooth decay
- missed opportunity to teach your child about food preparation and planning.

Peer pressure to eat 'popular' foods at this age is strong – children can be influenced by television ads and marketing of food products. It's OK to

let your child enjoy these foods from time to time, at parties or special events.

## Drinks

Active children need plenty of fluids. Encourage water as the main drink. Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drink are not needed for a healthy diet and are not recommended.

Some children may drink less milk as they get older; this is not usually a problem if they are eating a range of dairy foods as well. Three serves of dairy foods are needed each day to provide enough calcium for bone development; one serve equals a glass of milk, a tub of yoghurt or two slices of cheese. Reduced fat and skim milk/ dairy products are suitable for school aged children, but not for infants.

## Important tips for school aged children

- Children need a variety of different foods each day.
- Snacks are an important part of a healthy diet for active children.
- Take healthy snacks and lunch from home or buy nutritious food from the canteen.
- Encourage physical activities for the whole family.
- Encourage your child to be physically active for at least 60 minutes every day.
- Outdoor free play is the most accessible and beneficial activity for children.
- Plan to share meals as a family and enjoy talking and sharing the day's happenings at mealtimes.
- Let children tell you when they are full.
- Encourage children to drink plain water.
- Sweet drinks such as fruit juice, cordial and soft drink are not necessary.
- Let children help with food preparation and meal planning.

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