Limit ‘Sometimes’ Food and Drinks for Children

It is natural for children to enjoy sugary, fatty and salty foods and drinks. However, these are unnecessary and may lead to weight gain, greater risk of obesity, dental caries and other health problems. All foods can play a role in healthy eating and no particular food should be forced or overly restricted. Aim for a variety of healthy foods for the family everyday.

What are ‘sometimes’ foods and drinks?
Food and drinks which have very little nutritional value and contribute to poor health are often referred to as ‘sometimes’ food and drink. Parents and carers need to limit children’s access to and consumption of these items to small serves or not at all. Families may interpret ‘sometimes’ to mean less than 1-2 times a week.

Examples of ‘sometimes’ foods and drinks:
• Confectionary and chocolate
• Soft drink
• Biscuits, chips, bars and other packaged snacks which are high in fat or sugar
• Fast food and takeaway meals
• Fruit juice, juice drinks, cordials, sport drinks, energy drinks, flavoured milk, flavoured mineral waters and soft drinks.

What are ‘everyday’ foods and drinks?
‘Everyday’ food and drinks are those that provide children with the nutrients they need to be healthy and to grow. A variety of foods should be eaten, to ensure all the nutrients children need are provided. It is also important that children learn to eat and enjoy a variety of tastes and textures.

Offer a variety of foods from the following food groups throughout the day:
• Vegetables and legumes—fresh, frozen, tinned and dried
• Fruits—fresh, frozen, tinned in natural juice and dried (in small amounts)
• Cereals, breads, rice, pasta, noodles, especially wholegrain
• Milk and milk products, cheese and yoghurt
• Lean meat, fish, chicken, eggs and legumes

Challenges for parents
Parents need to limit children’s consumption of ‘sometimes’ food and drinks from an early age for a number of reasons.

Introducing solids
Breast milk or formula meets baby’s needs from birth. From six months of age, when baby starts on solid foods, eating will be a team effort with parents deciding what type of foods to offer their child and when, and your child will decide whether they will eat and how much they will eat.

Rice cereal with added iron is a common first food to try, follow this with finely mashed vegetables. Continue introducing other food varieties such as fruits, meats and other cereals.

Fussy eating
As your child learns to eat, patterns will develop and your child may pass through a food refusal stage. Showing independence is a common part of toddler development, testing you out to see the reaction they get! It is important that parents continue to offer the same variety of healthy family food options during this stage and not attempt alternatives or bribes with less healthy snacks. Otherwise, children may learn to refuse healthy options in preference for these foods. Find fun ways to reward your child. Instead of food, as a reward, try reading a story, playing or stickers. Be patient and keep offering nutritious meals and snacks.

Peer pressure
Children are influenced by food advertising, and their siblings and friends’ food choices. Remember that not all children snack on ‘sometimes foods’ or go to childcare or school with lunch boxes filled with chips and lollies, despite what children might say! It is important to keep offering healthy foods and healthy lunch box choices in different ways, as children learn to eat what is familiar to them. Remember it will take time to change your child’s food preferences to more healthy choices.

Role model healthy eating
Be a positive role model by eating well yourself, as your child will copy you. Buy, prepare and offer the foods you would like your child to eat. Involve them in food preparation where possible and enjoy meal times and healthy eating together as a family.
‘Sometimes’ food and drink advertising to children

Most television advertising during children’s viewing times promotes unhealthy eating of high fat, salt, sugar foods and drinks. Food advertising aims to influence children’s food choices so they then ask their parents to buy these foods.

What parents can do:
- Limit your child’s television viewing to less than 2 hours a day (a good idea for lots of reasons)
- Be aware of the impact food marketing is having on your child
- Talk to your child about why food advertisements are made
- Discuss why you are choosing not to purchase the foods or drinks advertised
- Choose ‘no-ad’ or ‘low-ad’ stations
- Provide active alternatives for your child to limit viewing time

Healthy alternatives to ‘sometimes’ foods

It can often be confusing when deciding which foods should be limited to sometimes or eaten everyday. Below are some examples of foods to avoid and healthy options to offer your child everyday.

Vegetables
‘Sometimes’: potato chips as they are high in fat and salt with no nutritional value.
‘Everyday’: a variety of fresh or tinned vegetables such as carrot, cucumber, sprouts, canned corn, beetroot, capsicum, lettuce, mushrooms, baked beans, cherry tomatoes.

Fruit
‘Sometimes’: dried fruit bars, ‘straps’ and dried fruits as they are low in fibre and sticky; the natural sugar is likely to get stuck in teeth so best avoided.
‘Everyday’: fresh fruit or tinned fruit in natural juice.

Dairy Food
‘Sometimes’: ‘dairy desserts’ and ice cream, they are usually high in fat.
‘Everyday’: reduced fat cheese, milk or yoghurt.

Biscuits and cakes
‘Sometimes’: sweet and ‘oven baked’ biscuits, sweet cereal bars, cakes and donuts do not give nutritional value.
‘Everyday’: high fibre dry biscuits, fruit or vegetable muffins.

Drinks
‘Sometimes’: all sweet drinks such as fruit juice, juice drinks, cordials, sports drinks, energy drinks, flavoured milk, flavoured mineral waters and soft drinks.
‘Everyday’: tap water and reduced fat milk are the best drinks for children. Full fat milk should be given to children up to two years of age and then reduced fat milk can be introduced.

Healthy schools and early childhood settings

Schools and early childhood settings are important places to teach children about the best food and drink choices. Healthy eating is important for improved concentration and learning and overall healthier children. Lots of schools and early childhood settings are changing canteens, food services and menus to make healthy choices available to children.

If your child is at school, they may have access to a canteen, or use a local shop or milk bar to purchase their lunch. Canteens in public schools need to meet the Victorian ‘Go for your life’ Healthy Canteen and Food Services policy which guide what types of foods are made available to children. Under this food policy healthy (Green) foods are the best everyday food and drink choices for your child and if less healthy foods (Amber and Red category foods and drinks) are available, it is best to choose these foods only ‘sometimes’ or ‘occasionally’.

Healthy Food Fast

Take-away or fast food options can offer a quick or convenient meal choice for families; however these tend to have a higher fat and salt content and may be lower in other important nutrients. Try to select freshly prepared, low fat foods that include a range of vegetables when choosing foods outside the home and stick with water as the main drink.

If different meal sizes are an option, select the small serve to prevent overeating.

Healthy, quick meals might include:
- vegetable wrap
- grilled fish and salad pack
- chick pea or lean meat burger with salad
- pasta with tomato based sauce and green salad

Important tips for limiting ‘sometimes’ foods and drinks for children

- ‘Sometimes’ foods to avoid are confectionary, chocolate, sweet drinks, snacks high in fat, salt and sugar, fast foods and takeaways.
- ‘Everyday’ foods to enjoy as a family are vegetables, fruits, cereals, milk and milk products, lean meat and legumes.

Limit children’s access to and consumption of ‘sometimes’ foods and drinks to small serves, less than 1-2 times a week.

- Introduce a variety of healthy foods from a young age, as children learn to eat familiar foods and healthy habits are likely to remain later into life.

- Parents decide which healthy foods to offer and children decide if and how much they will eat.

- Be patient when offering nutritious meals and snacks and keep trying.

- Find fun ways to reward your child instead of using ‘sometimes’ food.

- Be aware of ‘sometimes’ food marketing to your child and limit screen time at home.

- Pack vegetables, fruit, grainy bread or biscuits, low fat milk and lean meat in the lunch box for children.

- Be a positive role model by making healthy foods choices with your child.

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