

Healthy Eating

Every parent wants their child to grow up healthy and strong. One of the most important things a parent can do is make sure their child eats a varied balanced diet to meet the needs of the child's high energy and nutrient needs. What children eat and drink during their early years can affect their health for many years to come. General eating habits are formed in the first few years of life so it is very important that we encourage our children to eat good wholesome nutritious food. Eating well and being physically active will improve your child's health as well as their ability to learn and achieve at school, encouraging your child to eat healthily now will make them more likely to adopt a healthy lifestyle as they get older.

What is healthy eating?

Looked at simply, healthy eating means eating enough of the different dietary factors to replace all the things required by the body to function but not to eat any more than what is required. Children need a balanced diet, which is rich in fruit, vegetables and starchy foods to keep them healthy. You should encourage your child to choose a variety of foods to help ensure that they obtain the wide range of nutrients they need to keep fit and active. Children only need small portions to match their age, a portion is thought to be the size of a clenched fist, and it is wise to consider the size of your child's fist in comparison to yours when serving up their meals.

A Balanced Diet

Below is a diagram of the eatwell plate that has been developed by the Food Standards Agency. The eatwell plate is a food guide showing the amount of different types of food that are needed to make up a healthy balance diet.



You can see from the diagram that a healthy diet consists of:

- **Plenty of fruit and vegetables**
- **Plenty of bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods**
- **Some milk and dairy foods**
- **Some meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein**
- **Just a small amount of food and drinks high in fat and/or sugar**

Five a day

Fruit and vegetables are essential for a growing child's daily diet and you should strive to give your children at least five or more portions of these every day. Naturally low in calories and fat, they are a healthy choice any time. Fruits and vegetables are also full of water and fibre so they help you to maintain a healthy weight because they fill you up and regulate digestion. The phytochemicals (fight-o-chemicals), vitamins and minerals in fruits and vegetables work together with fibre to benefit your health in many ways. Phytochemicals are what give fruits and vegetables their colours so it is very important to eat a variety of colourful produce every day.

Are tinned and frozen fruit and vegetables as healthy as fresh ones?

Most frozen, tinned and dried fruits and vegetables can be just as nutritious as fresh produce. In some cases, when produce is frozen immediately after it is harvested it can have more nutrients than fresh, especially if it is out of season and has had to travel a great distance to get to your local supermarket. You shouldn't worry if your children are snacking on a small amount of dried fruit or if you are heating up frozen vegetables for dinner, they are all good choices and count towards your recommended five a day.

Added sugar and reading the labels

There are two types of sugar, those found in fruit and milk and those that are added to the diet, these can be found in a variety of food including sweets, soft drinks, desserts and breakfast cereals. Sugary food and drinks pose a serious threat to dental health especially if they are eaten between meals. You should always check the food label for added sugar as many foods you would least expect have a high sugar level.

More and more supermarkets have been adding the 'traffic light labels' to their products. This is a clear way to show you if the food you are buying has high, medium or low amounts of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salts. With this system if you see a red light on the front of a pack you immediately know it is high in something you should be trying to cut down on. If there is an amber light it means the food is neither high nor low in the nutrient and it is a good choice. Green means the food is low in that nutrient and it is the most healthy choice. You should always try to choose foods with amber and green lights

Age Matters

Nutritional guidelines will vary for the different members of the family. Adult bodies have different needs than those of teenagers, school aged children, toddlers and babies. You can check with your family doctor for specific recommendations for each of your family members based not just on age, but also on overall health and condition. From there, you will be able to create a healthy diet that maximises everyone's capacity for robust health and energy.

The main sources of information in this fact sheet are The Food Standards Agency www.eatwell.gov.uk and the NHS www.nhs.uk/change4life , www.5aday.nhs.uk

If you would like help with any other family issue, Please ring **Parents Advice Centre** for guidance and support on **Freephone 0808 8010 722** or email parents@pachelp.org