

Taming the toddler at meal time

Forming healthy eating habits

Moving into the toddler stage of your child's life is full of wonder, excitement and feeding changes. It can be a surprise for most parents but usually, toddlers who are not going through a growth spurt, seem to eat less than they did as infants. So remember to keep portion sizes small and they can always ask for more. For a general guideline on daily servings and caloric needs for infants and toddlers, visit

<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers/meal-and-snack-patterns-ideas.html>

Here are some guidelines for child-size portions based on age and activity levels. (For example, most two-to-three year-olds need: 2 cups of milk, 1 cup of fruit, 1 cup of vegetables, 2 oz of protein and 3 cups of grains with half from a whole grain source within one day).

As toddlers grow and learn, they continue to develop new eating skills and food habits. At times, your once-easy, eat-everything child may turn into an erratic, picky eater. Don't let these jags frustrate you — it's a common eating pattern for a healthy and active older toddler. Very few children pass through these years without going through this stage. Just remember to persevere and not allow feedings to become a power struggle or to give in and only serve macaroni and cheese at every meal.

Mostly, toddlers need a variety of foods daily from the following groups: fruit and vegetables, whole grain breads and cereals, lean meats, fish, chicken, eggs and legumes, and reduced-fat dairy products such as 1–2% milk, cheese and yogurt, for good health and growth. Restricted diets, unless due to a food allergy, are not recommended for toddlers, as they may limit the energy and nutrients needed for growth and development.

General guidelines for feeding toddlers:

Choose for health: Select foods that promote good health in both the short and long-term such as: lower-fat dairy products, an array of fruits and vegetables in different colors, lean protein, legumes and whole grains, and use of herbs and spices. Offer three regular meals and two to three planned snacks every day. Snack time should be at least two hours before the next meal, so that your child is hungry. Do not allow continuous snacking throughout the day.

Use the plate method: Aim for half of the plate to be filled with a half cup of both a fruit and vegetable, and split the other half with lean protein and a whole grain. Serve with low-fat milk or a calcium-fortified dairy alternative. Offer fresh, tender, easy-to-chew chunks of veggies by steaming, boiling or sautéing in olive oil. Avoid deep-frying, adding gravy or cheese sauce to veggies, as it adds a lot of unhealthy fat.

Avoid food fights: Some children are sensitive toward textures, temperatures and smells or colors of foods. If a food is not liked, try presenting that same nutritious food in a different form or from a different cooking method. Food jags are normal and common so when they occur, do not make a big deal about the foods they snub. Instead, offer foods they like, along with a variety of other foods. Never force your child to eat foods that are unwanted, but try to be creative when getting them to try new food. Respect your toddler's likes and dislikes. Always encourage your toddler to try at least one bite of a new food. If the food is rejected, offer it again at another meal/snack. Remember to be patient and creative when offering new foods — it can take up to 15 exposures to a new food before a child will accept it.

If your child is resisting meals, common reasons can be:

- Filling up on drinks — in particular, sweet drinks, juice or milk
- Being too tired to eat
- Not preferring the food served at that meal
- Too much snacking through the day or before the meal
- Not enough activity

Put the 'fun' in food: Make meals/snacks happen at the table with the family. Use this time to talk and discuss where the foods they eat come from. Give them child-sized utensils and plates, bowls and cups. Offer fun, bite-sized foods that can be eaten with fingers or other utensils. Toddlers really like small portions of foods and different shapes. Give them healthy dips to use with their foods. Involve them in meal time preparation and setting the table. Avoid other distractions and turn off the all media such as the TV, cell phones, etc.

Offer healthy snacks and drinks: Snacks are an important part of the day for young children, so keep these as healthy, nutritious and as interesting as possible. When kids are hungry, offer fruit and vegetables along with a whole-grain about two hours before or after a meal. If thirsty, offer water. Milk can be offered at snack time if your child has a small appetite and fills up easily at meals. Aim for two to three, 8 oz cups of milk a day. Avoid daily sweet drinks such as juice, soda, Gatorade; these are not needed.

Keep sweets, high-fat foods and fast food for sometimes foods. Serve these foods only once in a while: cookies, fruit chews, potato chips and take-out. Give options such as "You can have one cookie today, when would you like to eat it?" Do not use these foods to bribe, reward or punish your child. Doing so may lead to power struggles and perhaps lifelong struggles with behavior issues with food.

Monitor food intake away from home: Always ask about your child's eating habits from childcare staff. They may let you know that they just had a cupcake, so they won't need

another treat later in the day. Also, in a new environment, children may eat with others and experience new foods and tastes. Some parents may find that their toddler likes foods at childcare that they won't eat at home. Working together with childcare staff can positively reinforce healthy food messages and eating for your child.

By using these ideas and working on making food fun and appetizing, you can sail through the toddler mealtimes with ease.