

HOW TO CHOOSE NUTRITIOUS FRESH OR CONVENIENCE FOODS GUIDANCE & TIPS FOR PARENTS



Nutritious foods are those that contain a high amount of some nutrients and make up a healthy balanced diet. Here are some tips for choosing nutritious food for your toddler.

1. Choosing nutritious fresh foods

Fruit, vegetables, meat and fish are usually cheaper when they are in season. You can find lists of fresh foods in season on www.eattheseasons.co.uk

Fruit and vegetables that have been picked locally and sold quickly will have more vitamin C and folic acid than those that are stored or transported for long periods of time.

There is no real nutritional difference between organic and non-organic foods but organic foods are usually lower in pesticides as they have only been exposed to naturally occurring fertilizers and pesticides.

2. Choosing nutritious convenience foods for toddlers

Some convenience foods are nutritious and appropriate for toddlers. Others are less suitable because they do not contain enough of some key nutrients and contain too much salt, fat and sugar.

It is not necessary to cut out all the salt, fat and sugar in your toddler's diet. However, you should keep these ingredients to a minimum when you have a choice.

Unfortunately food labels do not always provide sufficient information to enable you to decide which convenience foods are the best for your toddler. Try to choose those that contain plenty of vegetables or fruits that are low in fat and are not too sweet.

Pre-prepared baby/toddler foods found in the baby aisles of supermarkets contain minimum levels of key nutrients and tend to have low levels of salt, fat, sugar and pesticides. Choose those that have higher amounts of meat, fish, eggs, lentils or other pulses for more iron.

Salt

Salt contains sodium, which is essential for your toddler to grow. However, too much salt in the diet can cause high blood pressure later in life.

To keep the salt in your toddler's diet low:

DO...

- serve nutritious foods that are preserved with salt, such as cheese, ham, bacon and Marmite BUT:
- use herbs and spices rather than salt to flavour your cooking
- choose canned food that is unsalted or low in salt
- compare the labels on packaged foods and choose those that are lower in sodium or salt

DON'T...

- add salt to food at the table
- give your toddler salty snacks such as crisps
- give your toddler adult ready meals or takeaway food regularly. If you do, then serve a small portion and use extra vegetables to make up the difference
- buy food with added salt if it already contains cheese, ham or bacon. Added salt should be listed in the ingredients

Fat

Most food contains some fat. In moderation this is not a problem because fat enhances the flavour of the food and provides valuable energy and essential fatty acids. However, too much fat can cause your toddler to become overweight.

To keep the fat in your toddler's diet at a healthy level:

DO...

- serve full fat milk and yogurt until your toddler is at least two years old – these foods are high in vitamin A so you can go on using them throughout childhood unless your toddler is overweight or gaining weight too quickly
- give your toddler cheese, eggs, lean meat and oily fish
- use oils with omega 3 fats such as rapeseed oil or soya oil for cooking and rapeseed, olive, soya or walnut oil for dressings
- compare food labels and choose those lower in fat
- limit pastries to an occasional treat

DON'T...

- let your toddler eat crisps or other packet snacks. Three or four crisps occasionally is fine but a whole packet is too high in salt, fat and calories
- spread butter or margarine too thickly on bread or toast
- use large amounts of cream
- buy fried takeaway food

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Sugar

Too much sugar can cause obesity and tooth decay. However there is no need to cut out sweet foods altogether. Ideally you should limit sweet food and drinks to just four times a day – that is as part of three meals and one snack.

To make sure your toddler has the right amount of sugar:

DO...

- dilute fruit juices and only serve them at meal times. In between meals give water, milk or sugar-free drinks
- give a pudding with each of the two main meals but keep it to a small serving and make sure it contains some fruit or add some pieces of fresh fruit to make it more nutritious
- choose cakes, biscuits and puddings that contain nutritious ingredients such as eggs, ground nuts, fruit, dried fruit, milk, flour and oats

DON'T...

- allow sweets or chocolates between meals. You can allow three or four sweets as part of the dessert sometimes
- buy yogurts with extra sugar – it will be listed in the ingredients list if it has been added. Choose those sweetened with fruit or fruit puree

Additives in food and E numbers

All additives with an E number have been tested for safety. However the Food Standards Agency now advises that toddlers should not be given foods that contain the following:

Colours: Tartrazine E102 Ponceau 4 R E124
Sunset yellow E110 Carmosine E122
Quinoline yellow E104 Allura red AC E129

Preservative: Sodium benzoate E211

Sweetener: Sorbitol

Some additives are quite nutritious. For instance ascorbic acid is vitamin C. Generally, however, it is best to choose foods for toddlers that contain few additives.

Tips to choose good nutritious foods for toddlers:

Foods	Good choices	Poor choices that are less nutritious
Fruit	Fresh, frozen, canned without sugar and dried	Tinned with added sugar
Vegetables	Fresh, frozen, canned without salt and freeze dried	Tinned with added salt Dried vegetables because vitamins B and C are lost when vegetables are dried
Breakfast cereals	Cereals low in sugar (<8g sugar/100g cereal) - with added dried fruit Wholegrain cereals Those with <0.7g salt or 0.27g sodium/100g cereal	Sugar coated cereals with > 10g sugar/100g cereal Cereals with oil or fat in the ingredients list
Bread	Offer toddlers a mixture of white and wholemeal, granary or mixed grain Choose those with lower levels of salt and fat: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • up to 1.0g salt or 0.4g sodium/100g bread • up to about 2g fat/100g bread Breads that contain more nuts and seeds will be higher in fat but also higher in other key nutrients	Those with fat in the form of vegetable oil. This is added to keep bread fresher for longer but adds extra unnecessary fat and calories
Savoury Foods		Those with hydrogenated vegetable fat or palm oil
Rice, pasta or couscous dishes	Those with added vegetables Those with added cheese Those lower in fat and salt Offer a mixture of white and wholegrain sometimes	Those that have been fried
Sausages	At least 90% lean meat content	Those with added skimmed milk powder or soya products - these ingredients are added to raise the protein level in sausages with little meat in them
Meat and meat products	Look for a high lean meat content in meat products Choose salamis and cold sausages that have over 95% meat content. Choose those lower in fat and salt	Coated in batter or breadcrumbs particularly those with more batter or breadcrumbs than meat
Fish products	Fish, tinned in water or oil. Drain the oil off Offer oily fish about twice per week Choose fish in batter or breadcrumbs that has lots of fish and very little batter or breadcrumbs - at least 70% fish	Fish tinned in brine as this contains extra added salt Those with more batter or breadcrumbs than fish
Vegetable sauces	Those with vegetables at the top of the ingredients list and less than 1g fat/100g sauce	Those with oil in the ingredients list

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Foods	Good choices	Poor choices that are less nutritious
Cheese sauces	Those with the highest amounts of cheese and milk.	
Pizzas	Those with thin baked crust and lots of vegetables	Those with fried bases, cheese stuffed crusts and few vegetables
Ready meals	Those with more vegetables	Those with the highest amounts of fat and salt
Crisps and packet snacks	None - limit toddlers to 3-4 crisps occasionally - never a whole packet	All
Nuts	Plain nuts that have been cut into small pieces so that there is no risk of aspiration or choking	Salted and dry roasted
Oils	Those rich in omega 3 fats: Rapeseed oil for cooking Walnut or olive oil for salad dressings Pure vegetable oil is often rapeseed oil and some bottles of vegetable oil have the little yellow rapeseed flowers on the label to indicate that source of oil	Those with very little or no omega 3 fats such as corn oil, sunflower oil, safflower oil
Cream	Fresh cream - use small amounts	Substitute creams - they are lower in vitamin A
Butter and margarine	Butter Margarines that are labelled 'no trans fats' Just a thin scrape of butter or margarine should be used on bread and toast	Margarines that may contain trans fats
Herbs	Fresh and dried herbs but fresh herbs are the better choice Grow your own even if you only have a window box	
Spices	All ground spices contain nutrients	
Sweet Foods	Those sweetened with sugar	Those sweetened with sweeteners Any with hydrogenated vegetable oil
Jam	Those with at least 50g fruit per 100g jam	Those with added flavourings and colours because they will contain less fruit
Yogurts and fromage frais	Those with fruit rather than fruit flavourings	Those with sugar higher than fruit in the ingredients list
Puddings	Those with milk or fruit at the top of the ingredients list. A milk based pudding should have at least 60% milk in the ingredients list	Those with sugar at the top of the ingredients list
Packet puddings	Those that are mixed with milk	Those with sweeteners or hydrogenated vegetable fat
Biscuits, cookies and cakes	Those with oats, some wholemeal flour or dried fruit Those made with rapeseed oil rather than other oils	Those containing hydrogenated vegetable oil or palm oil
Ice cream	Those containing milk, cream and fruit puree	Those containing vegetable oil rather than cream
Fruit juices	Pure unsweetened fruit juice - it should always be diluted with water one part juice to ten parts water	Fruit juice drinks as they have very little fruit juice content and are sweetened with sugar or sweeteners
Smoothies	Those that are based on milk or yogurt and fruit	Commercial smoothies, as they are very concentrated drinks and high in fruit sugars
Sweet drinks	Those sweetened with fruit juice	Those with very little fruit juice and sweetened with sugar
Flavoured milk	Those with natural flavourings such as vanilla and cocoa	
Chocolate and confectionery	Only give very small amounts e.g. six or seven chocolate buttons (5g) as part of pudding at the end of a meal	Sweets with artificial colours

3. Choosing ready meals for the family

Adult ready meals and takeaway foods are often high in fat and salt and may not be suitable for your toddler.

However, you can reduce the fat and salt content of ready meals by serving your child a small portion and making up the difference with extra vegetables. You can prepare these quickly in the time it takes to heat the ready meal. Wash some cherry tomatoes or peel a carrot and cut it into sticks.

Frozen vegetables can be prepared in minutes by adding them to a small saucepan of boiling water and simmering for a few minutes.

If you are comparing two ready meals check the label and buy:

- the one with more vegetables as this makes the meal lower in fat and salt and higher in vitamins for your toddler
- the one lower in salt and fat – but any with the nutritious ingredients cheese, ham or bacon will be high in fat and salt and this is acceptable

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4. Making convenience foods more nutritious

Foods	
Breakfast cereals	Choose one that is low in sugar and salt content and add flavour by serving with fruit - use fresh fruit, lightly stewed fruit or canned fruit, but fresh fruit is best
Yogurts and fromage frais	Buy plain, unsweetened varieties and mix them in equal quantities with fresh fruit or fruit puree
Biscuits, cookies, puddings, cakes and ice cream	Give a small serving and add some extra fruit or dried fruit on the side
Packet puddings	Give a small serving along with some slices of fresh fruit
Vegetable sauces	Add in some herbs or spices for more flavouring and more nutrients
Cheese sauces	Use small amounts and add some extra grated cheese
Pizzas	Before heating in the oven add some extra diced vegetables to the top e.g. diced peppers and courgettes. Add some extra grated cheese on top
Ready meals	These do not generally have a large amount of vegetables. Always serve a small portion of the ready meal and add some extra vegetables such as sliced salad vegetables or a serving of peas or corn that can be quickly prepared from a frozen packet
Sweets and chocolates	Keep servings small and always give as part of a pudding at the end of a meal – not as a reward or treat in between meals. Darker chocolate has more nutrients
Snacks	Give nutritious snacks such as sandwiches, fruit and vegetable sticks, scones, pancakes, breadsticks and cheese, yogurt and fromage frais, and breakfast cereal with milk. Snack bars such as cereal bars are often very high in fat and sugar. However they also contain some nutritious ingredients such as nuts, seed, oats or other cereals. Consider them as a biscuit or cake and offer your toddler small amounts served with some fresh or canned fruit. Packet snack foods such as crisps, potato rings and puffs contain fat and salt and virtually no nutrients. They are not suitable for toddlers and should be limited to very occasional small amounts such as three or four crisps. A whole packet has too many calories, and too much fat and salt for your toddler

5. What to look for in foods marketed for children

Foods that are marketed for children with cartoons and child friendly designs are not always the best choice for your toddler. Extra sugar is often added to breakfast cereals, yogurts and desserts. Always compare the label on these foods to a standard product or a product in the baby aisle and choose the one that has more nutritious ingredients such as fruit, vegetables, milk, eggs, flour, oats, meat, fish or cheese.

If your toddler insists on a product that contains no nutritious ingredients then give a small serving and offer some nutritious foods alongside it. For example offer some pieces of fresh or canned fruit with a chocolate pudding.

If you buy processed cheese products such as cheese straws, choose the ones that have about the same amount of salt and fat as normal cheddar cheese. That is around 35g fat and 0.7g sodium/1.75g salt per 100g processed cheese.

If you buy processed meat products, choose those that have about the same amount of protein, fat and salt as ham. That is about 20g protein, 5g fat and 1g sodium or 2.3g salt per 100g processed meat.



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