

COMBINING FOOD FOR A BALANCED DIET

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LEARNING POINTS

There are five food groups:

- 1** Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods
Serve at each meal and as some snacks. Offer a mixture of white and wholegrain varieties of bread and cereals
 - 2** Fruit and vegetables
Serve at each meal and some snacks. The more variety and colour the better although this may be difficult to achieve with fussier eaters
 - 3** Milk, cheese and yogurt
Serve three times a day. Toddlers need less milk than babies under one year
 - 4** Meat, fish, eggs, nuts and pulses
Two servings a day for non-vegetarians; three servings a day, with a high vitamin C food, for vegetarians
 - 5** Oils, butter and fat spreads
Include small amounts each day in food preparation
- A healthy diet for toddlers combines foods from each and all of the five food groups
 - Allow Toddlers to eat according to their appetites rather than to set amounts
 - Toddlers may eat more some days than others, and more at some meals than others
 - Sugary foods must be limited but can be included in small amounts: Cakes, biscuits, and puddings can be offered once per day. Confectionery and sweet drinks including fruit juices, smoothies, squashes and fizzy drinks need to be limited to one item once per week

COMBINING FOOD FOR A BALANCED DIET

Toddlers need a balanced diet to help keep them fit and well and to ensure they receive all the energy and nutrients that are essential for health, growth and development.

Providing a balanced diet involves combining foods from five different food groups and serving them in the correct proportions. The combination also involves a mixture of some high calorie and some low calorie foods so that too many calories are not eaten.

Convenience foods can be part of this balance.

See Factsheet 1.9

The food combinations suitable for toddlers differ from those for older children and adults, because toddlers need a diet higher in nutrients.

See the Portion sizes factsheet <https://www.infantandtoddlerforum.org/health-childcare-professionals/factsheets> for appropriate amounts to offer toddlers. Then allow your toddler to eat according to their appetite. The amounts eaten will vary from toddler to toddler – some eat more or less than average intakes, and yet grow and develop normally. The amount toddlers eat also varies from day to day, and meal to meal. Generally portion sizes will get larger as they grow taller.

See Factsheet 1.3

THE FIVE FOOD GROUPS ARE:

1 BREAD, RICE, POTATOES, PASTA and other starchy foods

This food group includes all types of bread, chapatti, pasta, rice, couscous, potatoes, sweet potatoes, yam, plantain (green banana), breakfast cereals and foods made from flour and other cereals such as rye, quinoa, millet and sorghum. A mixture of some white and some wholegrain varieties of bread and cereals can be offered.

Recommendation: One of these foods should be included at each meal and also offered at some snack times e.g.,

- breakfast – cereal, bread, toast or chapatti
- lunch and evening meal – potatoes, rice, bread, chapatti or pasta
- snacks – bread, bread sticks, rice cakes or crackers, other foods based on flour such as pancakes, tea bread and scones



2 FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

This food group includes fresh, frozen, tinned and dried fruit and vegetables.

Recommendation: Serve at each meal and some snacks. The more variety and colour the better although this may be difficult to achieve with fussier eaters.

Offering foods from this food group at each meal will teach toddlers that a meal should always have fruit and vegetables.



3 MILK, CHEESE AND YOGURT

This food group includes dairy foods such as milk, cheese and yogurt, which are rich in protein, calcium and some vitamins and minerals. Butter and cream are not included because they have virtually no protein and little calcium (they are in group five with high fat foods).

Toddlers need less milk than they did in their first year of life¹. Milk from feeding bottles should be discontinued before or around their first birthday and should be given in beakers or cups, on breakfast cereal or as milk puddings or white sauces².

Some mothers may breastfeed rather than offering cups of milk.

A formula milk can be considered for toddlers with a poor food intake as it is higher in iron and some vitamins than cows' milk.

Recommendation: Serve three times a day. Milk may be taken as a drink or poured onto breakfast cereal. Whole milk is higher in vitamin A and is suitable throughout childhood. There is no need to change to lower fat milks and children under two years should not change. Children under five years should not be given skimmed milk. Serving sizes will increase with the child's appetite as they grow, thus providing more protein, iodine, zinc and calcium. One serving is:

- about 100-120mls/ 3-4oz glass or cup of milk
- a 120g pot of full fat yogurt or fromage frais
- a serving of cheese in a sandwich or on top of a pizza slice
- a serving of custard or another milk pudding made with whole milk
- a serving of food in a white cheese sauce such as macaroni cheese

4 MEAT, FISH, EGGS, NUTS AND PULSES

Pulses include starchy beans like kidney beans (not green beans), chickpeas, hummus, lentils and dhal.

Red meat is the richest source of iron. When eggs, pulses and nuts are served, a food high in vitamin C should also be included in the meal to ensure good absorption of the iron which is less well absorbed compared to the iron in meat. [See Factsheet 1.1i](#) for high vitamin C foods.

Fish should be offered twice a week. Oily fish such as mackerel, salmon and sardines are a good source of omega 3 fats and should be served regularly – about twice a week. Because of traces of toxins found in these fish the Food Standards Agency recommends a limit of four times per week for boys and two times per week for girls³. It is less for girls as a precaution against accumulating high toxin levels into childbearing years.

Recommendation: Serve two to three times a day. Twice for children eating meat and fish, and three times a day for vegetarian toddlers who eat only eggs, nuts and pulses. This can be achieved by eating puddings and snacks containing eggs and ground or chopped nuts in addition to choosing savoury courses based on pulses, lentils and ground or chopped nuts.

5 OILS, BUTTER AND FAT SPREADS

Foods from this group provide toddlers with energy, omega 3 and 6 fats and the vitamins A, E and D.

Recommendation: Include small amounts to add flavour and enjoyment to meals. Rapeseed oil, olive oil, soya oil and walnut oil give a good balance of omega 3 & 6 fats⁴. In the UK "pure vegetable oil" is often rapeseed oil. [See Factsheet 1.1i](#)

Care of toddlers' teeth should include twice-daily brushing with a smear of fluoride-containing toothpaste and regular check-ups with the dentist.

[See Factsheet 4.5](#)

SUGARY FOODS

Cakes, biscuits, and puddings can be offered once per day. Crisps and other packet snacks and sugary foods such as sweets, chocolate, fruit juices, smoothies, and other sweet drinks need to be limited to one item once per week. They are high energy foods with very few nutrients. Too much of sweet food increases the risk of dental caries² and obesity.

References and Further Reading

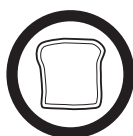
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COMBINING FOOD FOR A BALANCED DIET GUIDANCE & TIPS FOR PARENTS



To provide a healthy balanced diet for your child offer foods from each and all of the five food groups listed below each day. Don't worry if your toddler doesn't eat all of these every day. Simply aim to achieve an average over each week.



BREAD, RICE, POTATOES, PASTA and other starchy foods

Serve at each meal and offer some as snacks. For example:

- Breakfast – cereal and/or bread, toast or chapatti.
- Lunch and evening meal – potatoes, rice, pasta, couscous, bread, yam or plantain.
- Snacks – bread, bread sticks, rice cakes or crackers, other foods based on flour such as pancakes, tea bread and scones.



FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

Serve at each meal so that your toddler learns they are a normal part of each meal and at some snacks.

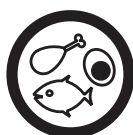
- Serve fruit at breakfast and at least one vegetable and one fruit at lunch and the evening meal.
- Set a good example by eating fruit and vegetables yourself.
- Cut raw fruit and vegetables into slices, cubes or sticks as toddlers find these easier to eat than a large whole fruit.
- Toddlers often prefer the flavour of vegetables that have been stir fried, roasted or baked rather than boiled.



MILK, CHEESE AND YOGURT

Serve three times a day. Toddlers need less milk than babies and you should aim to replace bottles with beakers and cups by your child's first birthday. One serving is:

- About 100-120ml (3-4oz) glass or cup of milk.
- A 120g pot of full fat yogurt or fromage frais.
- Cheese in a sandwich or on top of a pizza slice.
- A serving of custard or another milk pudding made with whole milk.
- A serving of food in a white cheese sauce such as macaroni cheese.
- Some toddlers may continue with breastfeeds.
- A formula milk can be considered for toddlers with a poor food intake as it is higher in iron and some vitamins than cows' milk.



MEAT, FISH, EGGS, NUTS AND PULSES

Serve twice a day for toddlers who eat meat and fish and three times a day for vegetarians. Always serve a high vitamin C food with vegetarian meals to ensure good absorption of iron.

- Most toddlers prefer softer cuts of meat such as chicken, minced meat, sausages, pate or slowly baked meat. Some will refuse hard, chewy textures.
- Serve oily fish such as mackerel, salmon and sardines in fish cakes or fish pie up to twice a week for girls and four times a week for boys.
- Vegetarian alternatives include eggs, ground or chopped nuts and pulses such as beans, chickpeas, hummus, lentils and dhal.
- High vitamin C foods include tomatoes, peppers, citrus fruits, kiwi, pineapple and fruit juices high in vitamin C.



OILS, BUTTER AND FAT SPREADS

Add some each day into food preparation.

- Rapeseed oil is highest in omega 3 and is the best for cooking. Olive oil, soya oil, and walnut oil have a good balance of omega 3 and 6 fats.

SUGARY FOODS AND PACKET SNACKS

- Toddlers over 2 years can have cake, biscuits or ice cream with fruit as a pudding once per day. Limit sweets, chocolate, fruit juices and other sweet drinks, crisps and other packet snacks to one item once per week.



Practical advice for healthy eating habits
from pregnancy to preschool

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