

WHY IS A HEALTHY TODDLER DIET IMPORTANT? FACTSHEET

SUPPORTING HEALTH

The nutritional needs of a toddler are very different to those of an adult, and different from their needs as an infant. Good nutrition plays a vital role in supporting health throughout the life cycle. Poor diet quality in those early years can be linked with obesity, heart disease and diabetes in later life¹.

Rapid growth and development

Early childhood is a period of particularly rapid growth and development, as well as activity, so it is important that food is chosen for its nutritional value during this time to support needs. Between the ages of 1 to 3 years, a toddler gains a staggering 40% in height and weight², and a significant amount of brain and organ development occurs³. In order to support this rapid growth toddlers need around 2x the amount of calories compared to adults⁴.

Toddler needs for micronutrients

Per kilogramme (kg) of bodyweight per day, toddlers have higher needs for some micronutrients versus adults, such as zinc, calcium, iron and vitamins A, C and D⁴. Choosing nutritious foods and offering a pattern of 3 meals and 2-3 snacks per day should provide adequate amounts of nutrients, alongside a daily vitamin D supplement⁵.



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Setting up good eating habits

Early childhood is also the time when eating habits and preferences are formed which can persist through life, so it is important that healthy habits are encouraged. Bear in mind:

- Between the ages of 2-5 years, toddlers can gradually move over to having the same meals as the rest of the family⁶, keeping the focus on choosing food for nutritional value. Parents can be advised to follow the Eatwell Guide⁶ for help on this.
- Feeding toddlers can be a challenge. Toddlers tend to develop a fear of new foods in their second year, known as 'neophobia'⁷. Children at this stage in their development want to be more independent and exercise more control over their own life, and food is one of the few areas where they can assert themselves. Toddlers may also become fussy eaters and may reject both new and familiar foods based on flavour or texture⁷.

Dental health

Tooth decay or dental caries, is the most common oral health problem in pre-school children in the United Kingdom (UK) and the toddler diet is one of the risk factors⁸. To help prevent caries from a dietary perspective, sugar intake needs to be limited; only give water to toddlers if they wake in the night; offer toddlers all drinks in cups and not bottles; avoid frequent eating and drinking to prevent plaque build-up, sticking to 3 meals and 2-3 snacks per day⁹.

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