



A nutrition newsletter for families with children under five

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Welcome to the third edition of "Food Matters" a quarterly nutrition newsletter for families with children under five. We would like to hear your stories, concerns and what you would like to know more about. Contact the Health Information Centre at the Women's and Children's Hospital on (08) 8204 6875.



Influencing children's food choices

By dietitians from the Women's & Children's Hospital

Our eating patterns are very complex and are affected by a wide range of factors. These include family needs and food preferences, cultural and religious background, values, attitudes and beliefs related to food, and food advertising. Food choices are also determined by how much money is available to buy food, facilities in the home, access to shops and skills in food preparation and cooking. Food habits and attitudes to foods develop at an early age and often reflect those of parents, caregivers and significant adults. It is important to be aware that children's food choices are affected by many factors and these start to have an influence at a very early age.

Parents have an important role to play

As parents you play a key role in influencing your child's food choices and attitudes towards food. The foods that you regularly choose to serve at home are likely to be the foods your child will be familiar with and will be more likely to eat on a regular basis throughout life.

Children need to have the opportunity to try as wide a range of food as possible. Even at a very young age, children learn about eating from their parents. Children need to see their parents eating and enjoying a wide variety of foods. The best way to encourage your child to try new foods is to set a good example by eating healthy foods together. It is best if both parents are giving consistent messages. It is confusing for children if they hear opposing views about food from adults; for example, if one parent encourages vegetables yet the other refuses to eat them.

It is important for children to feel that meal times are valued by the family. A positive, relaxed meal-time environment without television allows you and your child to interact and enjoy the food.

Other people have an important influence

A range of people in your child's life can also influence attitudes to food and food choices. These may include grandparents, friends, neighbours, and carers at child care. These people may

encourage your child to eat different foods from those usually eaten at home. This may or may not be desirable, depending on whether the food is healthy or not.

Child care has been shown to have a positive influence on children's food habits. Children attending child care are more likely to accept new foods and thus are making choices from a wider range of foods. Other children make a difference to your child's food choices. At a young age children are more likely to try something new, or eat a food they say they don't like, if another child is eating it.

The role of TV

It is thought that for some children the TV has even more influence on food choice than the family. During children's viewing time, TV marketers target their advertisements directly at children, who at a young age are unable to discriminate fact from fiction. Marketers rely on the children's ability to persuade parents to purchase products. This is called

Apple Pancakes

They taste great hot or cold and can make a complete meal on their own or be used as a snack or part of a meal.

5 apples

500g self-raising flour

2 beaten eggs

1 cup milk

oil

sugar or cinnamon

Peel and slice apples thinly. Mix the flour, milk, eggs and sliced apple together. Heat a small amount of oil in a pan and add small ladles of batter. Fry until golden and crispy on both sides. Serve warm, sprinkled with cinnamon or a small amount of sugar.



Snacks

It is important that the majority of a child's snacks are nutritious. The best snacks are those based on breads, cereals, vegetables and fruit, and sometimes including dairy foods. Examples of easy-to-prepare snacks are:

- bread (plain or fruit), crumpets, pikelets, bread rolls, french stick, scones, English muffins, dry biscuits (wholegrain and reduced salt) - spread lightly with poly- or mono- unsaturated margarine

- fruit and vegetables, cut into pieces (do not give hard, raw fruit or vegetables to children under 4 years of age as this may cause choking)

- milk, yoghurt, cheese

- water

Foods such as muesli bars, fruit straps and dried fruit are sticky and high in natural and/or added sugar and contribute to dental caries. Snacks such as potato crisps and some muesli bars are high in fat and not recommended for regular snacks.

By Eat Well SA

Influencing children's food choices

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'pester power' by the industry. Most food advertisements aimed at children are for foods which are high in fat, salt and sugar and low in fibre and nutrients. These include fast foods, sweetened breakfast cereals and confectionery. These are not the kinds of foods recommended for promoting children's health. However these are unfortunately the foods children will ask for, as they are promoted as fun and exciting on TV.

TV: What can parents do?

You may ask, "What can I do?" about this powerful influence on your child's eating. You can monitor your child's TV watching and limit the time spent watching TV as this will limit its influence. See further suggestions in the box opposite.

Nutritionists involved in the area of food advertising directed at children, answer your questions

I am concerned about the lack of advertising for healthy foods. It seems that all the ads on TV are for foods that I would prefer my children not to have.

Whenever we go to the supermarket it is a constant battle to avoid putting these foods into the trolley as the kids seem to want them so badly after seeing them on TV. Do you have any suggestions?

Yes, it certainly is frustrating and we can sometimes feel powerless against this influence on our children's food preferences. However there is action you can take on a range of levels to combat these influences.

In the home, you can talk with your children about the advertisements and what they mean.

- Discuss the nutritional content of foods advertised to help children analyse their 'health' value.
- Discuss any misleading aspects of the ads eg does it show real fruit when in fact the food is only fruit flavoured?
- Discuss the advertising techniques used so that children appreciate how they are being persuaded.

Children are never too young to have a healthy dose of scepticism about what they see on television.

You can also write, telephone or visit your local State and Federal politicians and ask them to support more healthy food ads on television or less 'junk food' ads. As well, you can make your voice heard through organisations such as 'Food Ads to Kids Action Group'. Contact Kaye Phillips at Noarlunga Health Services for information for parents who feel something needs to be done about television advertising during children's viewing time. Phone 83849218.

The SA Child Care Nutrition partnership aims to promote good nutrition for all South Australian preschool children in child care. Partners include representatives from Child Care Associations, Dept Education, Training & Employment, TAFE, Gowrie Training Centre, SA Dental Service, childcare centre cooks, Australian Nutrition Foundation, Women's and Children's Hospital (Dept Nutrition & Food Services and Children's Health Development Foundation), Eat Well SA, Anti-Cancer Foundation, Community Health Services and Dept Human Services.

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