



choice

Guide

Kids & nutrition

Welcome

Raising healthy and happy kids is what every parent sets out to achieve. But sometimes it can be difficult to know whether your children are meeting all their nutritional requirements.

With a little help from CHOICE and consultation from health experts, you can help your kids establish healthy eating habits for life and ensure they receive all the nutrients they need to help their bodies grow and develop.

For years, we've been doing our homework on every stage of your child's life – from newborns to toddlers and school-aged children – so whether you want to know more about breastfeeding or the different types of formula on the market, how to cope with fussy eaters or what to pack your in your child's school lunchbox, we can guide you in the right direction.

And when it comes to more controversial issues, such as kids' diet supplements and the marketing of foods high in salt, fat and sugars to children, we've got you covered there, too.

Kate Browne

CHOICE journalist and
parenting expert

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Food for kids

An overwhelming proportion of kids' foods are far from healthy, even though the marketing campaigns for many suggest they are. CHOICE is working hard to ensure the food supply and marketing of

food encourages healthy eating and does not undermine efforts to reduce obesity.

Our criteria

To help you make sense of the often confusing nutritional

FOODS (per 100g)

NUTRIENT	A little (per 100g)	OK (per 100g)	A lot (per 100g)
Total fat	≤ 3g	3.1g – 19.9g	≥ 20g
Saturated fat	≤ 1.5g	1.6g – 4.9g	≥ 5g
Sugars	≤ 5g	5.1g – 14.9g	≥ 15g

DRINKS (per 100g)

NUTRIENT	A little (per 100g)	OK (per 100g)	A lot (per 100g)
Total fat	≤ 1.5g	1.6g – 9.9g	≥ 10g
Saturated fat	≤ 0.75g	0.8g – 2.4g	≥ 2.5g
Sugars	≤ 2.5g	2.6g – 7.4g	≥ 7.5g

DIETARY FIBRE PER SERVE

Grams of dietary fibre per serve	How much?	Symbol
≥ 6.0g	Excellent	🌾🌾🌾
3.0g – 5.9g	Good source	🌾🌾🌾
1.5g – 2.9g	Some fibre	🌾🌾🌾
≤ 1.5g	Not much fibre	🌾🌾🌾
	Not labelled	❓

panels you see at the back of products, we rate all foods for nutritional quality based on a series of criteria that are based on recommendations and dietary guidelines established by government health experts in Australia and overseas. They help you determine which foods are high in the nutrients we shouldn't have too much of, and which are low in those nutrients.

Recommended daily intake for an 8-year-old

	Boy	Girl
Energy	7900kJ	7400kJ
Protein	20g	20g
Fat	63g	59g
Saturated fat	21g	20g
Sugars	95g	89g
Fibre	18g	18g
Sodium	1400mg	1400mg
Calcium	700mg	700mg
Iron	10mg	10mg

MAD ABOUT MILK

Milk is naturally higher in total fat and saturated fat than other drinks, but the protein and calcium and other nutrients it contains mean it's an important part of a healthy diet. The *Australian Guide to Healthy Eating* considers milk to be one of the three most important foods in the dairy food group along with yoghurt and hard cheeses. All three are good sources of calcium



and protein as well as other important vitamins and minerals. Kids and adults alike should eat between two and five serves of this food group each day.



Foods for breastfeeding

The benefits of breastfeeding for mother and baby are well documented. But because what breastfeeding mothers eat or drink can affect their baby, there are certain foods breastfeeding mums should eat and substances they should avoid.

Foods to eat

The *Australian Guide to Healthy Eating* recommends breastfeeding women eat a range of healthy foods, based on these guidelines:

- 5-7 servings of bread, cereals, rice, pasta and noodles. There's a daily allowance of about 20g of poly- or monounsaturated fats and oils.
- 7 servings of vegetables, including legumes.

- 5 servings of fruit.
- 2 servings of milk, yoghurt or cheese.
- 2 servings of meat, fish, poultry, eggs, nuts and legumes.

To replace the fluid lost through breastfeeding, women should drink nine cups of fluid daily. Avoid alcohol and limit other fluids such as those listed below.

STEER CLEAR OF...

The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends breastfeeding women not drink alcohol. It's also advised that caffeine consumption be limited to two to four cups of coffee, tea or cola per day. And it's been found that cigarette smoking compounds the effects of caffeine in breastfed babies.

If you find you need to avoid many different foods to keep your baby happy, talk to a dietitian or nutritionist.

Bottle feeding

If you're unable to breastfeed your baby, you'll need to choose an infant formula. These are designed to mimic the composition of breast milk as closely as possible. They have the right balance of vitamins and minerals, and the fat they contain is more easily digested than that of cow's milk, which shouldn't be used as the primary milk drink in the first year of your child's life.

Types of formula

Most formulas are based on cow's milk, but some use protein derived from soy beans and also specialised formulas for specific dietary needs (these aren't usually available over the counter).

Cow's milk formulas are based either on casein or whey. If you use an infant formula during the first year of your baby's life, we suggest using a whey-based formula, which more closely resembles breast milk.

Soy formulas are designed for when a baby is temporarily unable to digest lactose – after gastroenteritis, for example – and are prescribed if the baby is diagnosed as being intolerant of cow's milk protein.

Goat's milk is sometimes fed to babies instead of cow's milk, but it lacks some of the vitamins your baby needs and is often sold unpasteurised (therefore containing potentially disease-causing organisms). It shouldn't be used unless recommended by your doctor.

If you wish to change your regular brand of formula, check with your doctor or early-childhood nurse that the one you choose is appropriate.





Baby foods

When it comes to baby food, buying certified organic products guarantees to limit your baby's exposure to conventional pesticides, chemical fertilisers, hormones and antibiotics, and supports environmentally friendly methods of farming. But are all organic baby foods created equal?

Choosing the right baby food

Look carefully at whether all or only some ingredients are certified organic if you're wanting a 100% organic product.

Don't be swayed by claims of "no added artificial" this or that. Vitamin C is often added to make up for losses in processing, and acts as an antioxidant to prevent fats turning rancid and fruit and veg going brown. But food regulations mean you won't find additives such

as preservatives, colours and flavours in any foods for babies less than 12 months old.

Check the ingredients list for added sugars (including fruit juice concentrate, which is often used as a sweetener and isn't as nutrient-dense as fruit) and the nutrition panel for sodium content per 100g, which should always be less than 100mg.

Check the ingredients list to see how much of the food is the ingredients you're paying for. The ingredient present in the largest amount comes first and so on down to the smallest. At the very least, the ingredients in the food's name and pictured on the label should have their percentage declared.

Are thickeners and water being used? They're sometimes necessary, but work out how much of the product is the food ingredients you want and how much is water and/or thickener,

which for many products should be low down on the ingredients list or not there at all.

Food safety is especially important for babies.

Processed baby food in unopened jars, cans or shelf-stable packs can be left unrefrigerated, but

chilled or frozen baby foods need careful handling when you're out and about. In addition, make sure you refrigerate unused portions (following the manufacturer's instructions) and never reheat already heated or eaten-from foods.

MAKE YOUR OWN BABY FOOD

- Introducing solids gets your baby from breast milk or formula at about six months to eating appropriate family foods by 12 months.
- Puréeing or mashing what the family is eating is the simplest solution, as long as you all have a healthy diet. But don't mix too many flavours together at first – try single ingredients or simple combinations.
- Gradually moving to chunkier textures and finger foods is important. If you keep your baby on soft, smooth foods for too long, eating problems can develop.
- You don't need to add sugar or salt to your baby's food (manufacturers can't add salt to baby foods). Remove your baby's portion first if you salt the rest of the family's food and go easy on salty ingredients such as cheese. Choose low-salt versions of creamed corn, baked beans and tuna.
- Follow safe food-handling principles stringently – babies are particularly vulnerable to food poisoning.



Coping with fussy eaters

You're not alone in worrying about your toddler's eating habits. By definition, anyone who refuses a new food at least half the time is considered a fussy eater – and by this criterion, about half of all toddlers are fussy eaters!

While it can be difficult to coax a toddler into eating something they don't want to, there are some strategies you can attempt to encourage them to try to enjoy a wider range of foods.

Introduce textured foods. If you only give your child smooth and puréed foods,

they may automatically resist trying anything with a lumpier texture. Once they're eating confidently, try forking and mashing – rather than puréeing – cooked vegetables and fruits.

Try, try, try again. Food rejection is normal. Children are basically creatures of habit and will usually prefer to stick with the familiar. So it's totally normal to have to offer a new individual food many times before your child will happily eat it. However, most parents only persist two or three times before giving up on that particular food altogether.

Practise what you preach. Research has found most toddlers who are fussy eaters have parents who admit to being fussy eaters too. To encourage your toddler to happily try a wide range of foods, you need to widen your own eating habits. Don't only offer them foods you like.

Don't make the dinner table a battleground. Try not to pass on your anxiety about your child's eating habits to them, or force or bribe them into eating. Mealtimes shouldn't be a power struggle.

Top tips for feeding toddlers

- A healthy child will never willingly starve themselves if they have access to a variety of wholesome food.
- If you're really worried about what your toddler eats, keep a chart for a week and write down everything they eat. You'll probably be surprised by how much they manage to get through even though they never seem to eat anything at all.
- Keep an eye on their height and weight gains – if they're consistently growing despite their small appetite, you have nothing to worry about. If they're not growing or behaving as you'd expect, seek medical advice.
- Don't cater to their every whim. You'll promote fussy eating if you keep offering different food choices until they accept one. If you want to give them a choice of food, limit the choice to two.
- If your child is a fussy eater, keep snacking to a minimum so they're hungry at mealtimes and more willing to eat.
- Eat with your toddler. They'll be more willing to sit down and eat if they have company and come to understand that eating can be a social activity.



Snacks

All babies and toddlers, especially in their second year, need a variety of healthy snacks throughout the day. But how do you decide what's healthy and what's just marketing hype?

Baby foods formulated for infants up to 12 months and toddler foods aimed at children aged one to three are governed by specific food regulations. However, some of these products aren't necessarily different from snacks made for older children or adults. Parents are advised to take a proactive role in reading nutrition panels when looking for snacks for their children so as to avoid products high in saturated fat, added sugars and salt (labelled as sodium).

Savoury & sweet treats

The danger with many savoury snacks is high levels of fat and sodium – with sodium being dietitians' big concern.

The Australian Division of World Action on Salt & Health recommends that toddlers aged one to three should have no more than 832mg of sodium a day. But not all child-friendly savoury snacks are loaded with salt and fat, so it pays to check the nutrition panel on the pack.

When it comes to sweet treats, your average active three-year-old should have no more than about 74g of sugar daily. Given that a couple of pieces of fruit and a cup of milk could contribute about 40g of sugar, there's not a lot of room left for sweet snacks.



Drinks

Once children are 12 months old they can be given full-cream cow's milk to drink. Once a child is over two they can switch to reduced-fat milk instead. It's also recommended that young ones limit excessive consumption of other energy-dense drinks, such as fruit juice and soft drinks.

Toddler formula

Infant formula is designed to be a breast milk substitute for babies less than a year old. Yet a proliferation of toddler formulas that look almost identical to baby formula are being marketed at parents of kids aged one to three.

In 1992, Australia developed a voluntary, self-regulatory code of conduct for manufacturers and importers of infant formula. Signatories are restricted as to how they promote infant formula, but toddler formula falls outside the scope of the code. Paediatric dietitian Kate Di Prima says

although toddler milk could be a very short-term solution for children who may be malnourished after an illness, it's not necessary for healthy toddlers.

Toddler milk is not only an expensive way of providing nutrients easily obtained from food, but too much can fill a child's small stomach and make them reluctant to try food. And, it can contribute to constipation. Unless you've been otherwise advised by your GP or health professional, give toddler formula a wide berth.

WHAT ABOUT JUICE?

Ideally, children are better off drinking only milk and water. If you really want to give your child juice, it would be cheaper and more practical to give them a splash of fresh juice mixed with water in a cup.



Cereals

Breakfast is an important meal for kids. If they don't eat breakfast, they're likely to be hungry by mid-morning. Several studies have suggested that children who skip the meal tend to be fatter than those who don't, and there's some evidence to suggest eating breakfast improves kids' learning ability.

For the most part, if you're looking for a good cereal choice for your kids, ignore the colourful packaging and claims that are part and parcel



of kids' cereals. Compared with the cereals marketed specifically to kids, many popular family cereals are a better choice – provided your kids will eat them. They can even add a teaspoon of sugar to them and still get a more nutritious start to the day than if they stuck with the specially targeted children's cereal.

Choosing the right cereal

- Kids need less fibre than adults because it can make a small stomach full before it's had a chance to get enough energy and other nutrients. Too much can also cause children to get stomach upsets such as diarrhoea. But a cereal with a moderate amount of fibre is still better for them than little or none. As a guide, kids need their age plus 5-10 grams per day. For example,

a five-year-old should eat 10-15g a day.

- Go for cereals with less added sugar and sodium.
- Many breakfast cereals contain added vitamins and minerals, which can make a useful contribution to your child's diet. However, it's more important when choosing a cereal to base your shortlist on moderate fibre and low fat, sodium and sugar before you consider vitamins and minerals.

SPIN CONTROL

With all the marketing hype around many kids' foods, it can be difficult for parents to tell just how healthy they really are. [CHOICE Food for Kids](#) assesses the nutritional value of kids' foods and will help you make sense of the spin. Check it out today.

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Salt in foods

In conjunction with The George Institute for Global Health, in 2013 CHOICE reviewed the nutritional content of more than 240 products aimed at, or likely to be consumed by, children.

Disturbingly, we found:

- 49 products we classify as high in salt (at least 600mg sodium per 100g)
- 140 with moderate salt levels (121-599mg/100g)
- only 48 that were low in salt (120mg or less/100g)

What the dietitian says

Accredited practising dietitian Rachel Jeffery says care must

be taken when choosing food marketed at children – especially foods such as cereals and sweet biscuits – that is not normally considered to be salty or savoury but may contain high levels of hidden salt. The taste for salty foods is something that is learned, she says.

Jeffrey also suggests teaching children about nutrition by taking them to the supermarket and encouraging them to read nutrition panels. She says: “Look at the fat, salt and sugar and ask, ‘If we are going to choose this food, which is the better option?’”

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH? 1000mg of sodium is about 3g of common salt. There are just over 5.3g of salt in one teaspoon. Here are the recommended upper daily limits according to AWASH (Australian Division of World Action on Salt & Health).

1 – 3 years	4 – 8 years	9 – 13 years	14+ years and adults
2.5g salt (832mg sodium)	3.5g salt (1166mg sodium)	5g salt (1665mg sodium)	5.75g salt (1915mg sodium)



Omega-3s

The benefits of omega-3s on the developing brain and health in early childhood are well publicised. However, after the first few years of life, there is plenty of confusion among parents about how much omega-3 their child should be having, and if and when a supplement is necessary.

How much do they need?

The government’s Nutritional Reference Values say kids need 40-70mg per day depending on their age. This recommendation is based on the average intake of this group. It has been shown that children only consume small amounts of long-chain omega-3s so this isn’t likely to be the optimum intake.

A healthy diet for your child includes long-chain omega-3s, of which fish is the preferred source. If you can’t get your



child to eat fish, milk and yoghurt products can be fortified with omega-3s.

If you decide to give your child omega-3 supplements, look for one containing the highest amount of DHA and EPA. It is not recommended to exceed the dose listed on the label.

Mixed results

While research suggests that increasing omega-3 content for children with behavioural and learning problems, such as ADHD and dyslexia, may ameliorate symptoms of these conditions, more research is still needed to determine whether healthy children benefit from supplementation.



Healthy school lunchboxes

Eating healthily helps children concentrate and learn, so the best lunch is one that's nutritious and balanced. Involving your kids in choosing foods and preparing their lunch helps ensure it will be eaten.

You can build a tasty, nutritious and balanced school lunch for your child by including:

Starchy food is a carbohydrate-based food and includes bread, pasta, rice, potatoes (not chips!) and couscous.

Protein includes lean meat, tinned tuna, egg, tofu and baked beans. These are good sandwich fillers or ideal for adding to pasta or rice salad. Most of these high-protein foods also provide iron. Nuts and peanut butter are also good protein sources, but check your school doesn't have a nut-free safety policy before packing them. Protein-rich dairy foods, such as yoghurt and cheese, are also good sources of calcium.

Fruit and veg contain vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre, so include at least a serve of each.

Drinks keep kids hydrated and water is the best choice, although milk – both cow's and soy with added calcium – is also good.

LUNCHBOX SAFETY

To avoid food-poisoning bugs:

- Ensure your hands, chopping board and utensils are clean and dry before preparing food.
- Use an insulated lunchbox and/or place a freezer pack in with the food to keep it cool. Alternatively, a frozen drink bottle in the lunchbox should defrost by lunchtime.
- Keep already prepared food cool by freezing sandwiches the night before. Bread, cooked meat, cheese, peanut butter, baked beans, mashed eggs, Vegemite, yoghurt and fruit such as grapes can all be frozen.



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