

Healthy Children's snacks

Snacking is a major pastime for many Canadian children — with nearly one-fourth of kids' daily energy intake comes from nibbling between meals. Much of this nibbling is on pre-packaged snack foods, which are high in calories and low in nutrients. The popularity of these fattening treats may be one of the factors responsible for the country's childhood-obesity epidemic.

But snacking itself isn't necessarily bad. The content of your child's snacks is what's most important. Providing healthy snack choices now will help your children learn to make healthy food choices in the future.

Snacks are essential

Young children actually need snacks. Their stomachs are small, so they often can't get all the nutrients they need in a day through meals alone. They need smaller portions of food more often. A good rule of thumb for toddler serving sizes is about 1 tablespoon of food for each year of age. You can always give them more if they're still hungry.

Children's growth rates slow down after their first birthday. Because they need fewer calories at this time, they tend to eat less. Continue to provide healthy food choices for meals and snacks. Don't get upset or force children to clean their plates.

Certain foods may cause choking in younger children. Avoid feeding raw vegetables, popcorn, nuts or peanuts, and dried fruits — such as raisins — to children under 3. Quarter hot dogs lengthwise and then cut into small pieces. Slice grapes in half.

Don't spoil your dinner

Children who attend child care may not be hungry at the family mealtime if their caregivers serve them a late afternoon snack. Consider asking your childcare provider to not offer a snack too late. If your child is frequently in childcare until 6 p.m. or later, you may even pack an evening meal for him or her to eat at 4:30 p.m., before going home. Then your child can have a healthy snack at home during the family dinnertime.

Fruit juice: Friend or foe?

Children often prefer fruit juice to water or fresh fruit because juice tastes better to them. And many parents see no problem with allowing their children to drink almost unlimited amounts of juice, since juice is promoted as a good source of nutrition.

Although juice does contain some healthy nutrients, it's high in calories and it may contribute to weight gain and tooth decay if consumed in excess. Some juice drinks, even those with 100 percent juice, have more calories than sugary carbonated beverages do. Juice also lacks the healthy fibre that whole fruit has.

Sugar attacks teeth

Sugary snacks, including sugared soft drinks and fruit juices, can cause cavities. Bacteria in the mouth convert sugar to a type of acid that eats away at tooth enamel. This acid continues to damage teeth for at least 20 minutes.

Goosey and sticky sweets usually result in the most damage because they spend more time in your mouth. Allowing toddlers to sip juice all day long gives their teeth a sugar bath that lasts the entire day.

Expanding choices

Once children begin attending school, their food options expand beyond what you choose to buy at the grocery store. But you still have some control over what's in the refrigerator for their after-school snack. They'll typically grab whatever's close and easy.

If cookies are available, they'll eat cookies. If there are no cookies, fresh fruits and raw vegetables will sound much more appealing. Try to have a selection of vegetables already cut up and ready to eat in the refrigerator.

Other healthy choices may include:

- Microwave popcorn
- Low-fat or fat-free milk, cheese or yogurt
- Low-sugar, whole-grain cereals

Sugar-filled beverages

Keep an eye on what your children are drinking as well. By the age of 14, a third of Canadian girls and more than half the boys are drinking at least three 8-ounce servings of sweetened soft drinks daily.

When checking the sugar and calorie contents on soft drinks, keep in mind that every 20-ounce bottle contains 2.5 servings. That means a soft drink that contains 100 calories per serving provides you with 250 calories if you drink the entire bottle.

Nutrition labels: Reading between the lines

You've probably seen a lot of food products labelled **low-fat**, **reduced-fat**, **reduced-calorie**, **light**, **sugar-free** or **fat-free**. Be careful when evaluating these nutrition claims, and check the nutrition label to find out the whole story.

Sometimes what appears to be healthy really isn't. For example, foods marketed as low-fat or fat-free can still be high in calories, and most snack foods are naturally "cholesterol-free," but they can still be very high in fat, saturated fat and sugar.

Snack-time tips

It's not always easy to persuade your children to eat healthy snacks. Try experimenting with the following techniques to promote snack-time health:

- **Offer similar choices.** For example, don't say: "Do you want ice cream or do you want pretzels?" Instead, offer comparable choices, such as regular or frozen yogurt, celery or carrots, graham crackers or soda crackers, apples or oranges.
- **Provide variety.** Select snacks from a variety of food groups. If you serve the same snacks repeatedly, your children might get bored and ask for unhealthy snacks instead.
- **Be creative.** Dress up fruits and vegetables for maximum appeal. Prepare celery with peanut butter, for example, or carrots with low-fat dip. Offer crackers with several varieties of cheeses. Cut vegetables in different ways to make them visually interesting.

Healthy eating

Don't forget to be a good role model for your children. You can't expect them to be content with broccoli and low-fat milk when you're washing down your potato chips with a quart of sugary carbonation.

Your children's snacking habits aren't going to change overnight, but look for positive changes over weeks and months. Teaching your children to make healthy snack choices today will reap your whole family an entire lifetime of benefits.