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Healthy eating for the under 5's

From weaning to the age of five years old, children grow extremely quickly and are very active. Because of this it is important to ensure that their diet is healthy, balanced and meets their requirements for energy and nutrients.

Pre-school children also have small stomachs and relatively under-developed guts which prevents them from consuming large quantities of food at a time and causes harmless bowel problems. They also have variable appetites, related to fluctuations in growth rates and levels of physical activity.

While healthy eating guidelines for adults and older children are not wholly appropriate for pre-school children, especially those under two years old, they can be used to shape the diet from an early age so there is a gradual progression towards healthy eating as the child gets older.

Pre-school children need small frequent meals and snacks throughout the day. A wide range of foods should be eaten to ensure that nutrient requirements are met. Therefore it is important to include these sorts of foods every day:

Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta - these starchy foods provide carbohydrate, vitamins, minerals and fibre.

Fruit and vegetables - these contain vitamin C, and other protective vitamins and minerals, as well as fibre.

Milk and dairy foods - these provide fats, protein, vitamins and minerals, especially calcium.

Meat, fish, eggs, beans - these are rich in nutrients such as protein, vitamins and minerals.

Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta

Wholemeal bread and wholegrain cereals are high in fibre and while a small amount of fibre is important for health in pre-school children, too much can cause problems in still maturing guts and also reduce energy intakes by bulking up the diet. Also, too much fibre can sometimes reduce the amount of minerals they can absorb, such as calcium and iron. Provide a mixture of white and refined cereals, white rice and pasta as well as a few wholegrain varieties

to maintain a good balance.

Fruit and vegetables

Children should be encouraged to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day. Establishing this habit from an early age and an understanding of its importance is valuable in helping to shape future healthy eating habits. A portion for a pre-school child is approximately what fits in their hand.

For example:

- Small banana
- Half a sliced apple or pear
- Peeled satsuma
- Small box of raisins
- 40g portion of vegetables
- 25ml fruit juice diluted with water

Milk and dairy foods

Children should have full fat versions of dairy products such as yoghurts, fromage frais and cheese. If a child is growing well and displays a good appetite for a variety of foods, semi-skimmed milk can be introduced from two years. However, skimmed milk should not be offered to the under 5s as it is too low in energy and vitamins.

Meat, fish, eggs, beans

Meat and fish should be offered on a daily basis unless there are cultural or religious reasons for not doing so. Non-meat sources of iron such as eggs, beans and pulses should be eaten with foods that provide vitamin C, which will enhance the absorption of the iron.

Liver is a good source of iron but it also rich in vitamin A, which can be harmful in large amounts. It is therefore recommended that liver and liver products are not given to children more than once a month.

Oily fish, which are a good source of omega 3 fats, should be offered along with white fish at least twice a week. Some examples of oily fish include salmon, trout, mackerel, sardines and fresh tuna (canned does not count). You can give boys up to four portions of oily fish a week, such as mackerel, salmon and sardines, but it's best to give girls no more than two portions of oily fish a week.

Up to the age of three, a child needs at least half a pint (250-300ml) of milk a day (breast milk/formula for children under one year old and full-fat cows' milk or a combination for one year and above).

By the time your child reaches the age of five years old they should be eating family food. However, you should ensure that their diet does not contain too

much saturated fat, which is found in butter, spreads, fatty meat products, biscuits and cakes.

Foods to avoid

Other foods that should be avoided are:

- raw eggs and foods that contain partially cooked eggs
- whole or chopped nuts (to eliminate the risk of choking)
- shark, swordfish or marlin (they contain high levels of mercury)
- raw shellfish
- food containing high levels of salt, and food and drink containing high levels of sugar

Avoid adding salt to a toddler's food. From the age of 1 to 3, children should be having no more than 2g a day. Always check the label of processed foods, even those aimed at children, and choose those with less salt.

Try not to give sweet drinks such as fizzy drinks and fruit squash because they cause tooth decay. If you do give fruit squash or sugary drinks, make sure they're well diluted with water and drunk at mealtimes. Between meals, it's better to give water or milk to drink.