

# Going for Balance:

## Achieving and maintaining a balanced diet



### ACHIEVING AND MAINTAINING A BALANCED DIET

The 'Balance of Good Health Plate' (or 'Eating for Health Plate' in Scotland) demonstrates the main food groups that are the constituents of a healthy diet and the proportions in which we, and especially children, should eat them.

#### The five main food groups and their recommended daily proportions are:

- Bread, cereals and potatoes: 33%
- Fruits and vegetables: 33%
- Milk and dairy foods: 14%
- Meat, fish, eggs and pulses: 12%
- Fats, sugars and oils: 8%

### BREAD, CEREALS AND POTATOES

Every meal and most snacks for young children should contain one or more portion from this group. Starchy foods satisfy children's appetites and are an important source of energy as well as providing vitamins, minerals and fibre.

Encourage young children to eat whole-grain/wholemeal bread; whole-grain breakfast cereals; pasta and brown rice; and also noodles, couscous, potatoes and sweet potatoes.

Encourage a low- or no-sugar breakfast cereal, such as porridge without sugar added to it. Some cereals are fortified with iron, folate and the B group vitamins which, with the addition of milk, provide valuable nutrients in a young child's diet.

Potatoes, sweet potatoes and yams should be served often and in different ways to young children. They can be boiled, steamed, baked or roasted with a light coating of sunflower or olive oil. Potatoes are a high-energy source rich in the B vitamins and vitamin C. However, many processed potato 'products' are high in salt and contain only hydrogenated (poor-quality) fats, a high intake of which lead to obesity.

Rice, pasta, noodles and couscous can be eaten hot or cold and are good sources of carbohydrate energy. Encourage whole-grain rice and pasta which are higher in the B group vitamins than their white counterparts. Avoid processed pasta and rice products (noodles in pots and rice in bags) because they often have a high salt content.

### FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

Fresh, frozen, dried and canned fruits and vegetables and fruit juices should be eaten by young children every day. (Remember that potatoes do not count towards '5-a-day' because they are a starchy food.)

Fruit and vegetables are good sources of vitamins and minerals to help protect children from ill health from an early age. They contain fibre to help prevent constipation and other intestinal disorders. Vegetables contain special 'protective' components not found in other food groups. Many children prefer to eat their fruit and vegetables raw rather than cooked, and this should be encouraged. In addition, offer unsweetened fruit juices at meal times only, and avoid canned fruits in syrup and fruit drinks containing added sugar.

## MILK AND DAIRY FOODS

These foods include cows' milk, yoghurt and cheese. Young children (under the age of 5) should be offered plain whole milk every day. After the age of 5, they should be offered semi-skimmed; it provides energy and fat-soluble vitamins A and D. (Avoid low-fat skimmed milk because it provides insufficient energy.) Whilst milk is a 'food' in itself, drinking milk should be an accompaniment to meals and snacks, not a substitute for them. Avoid flavoured milks containing added sugars which cause tooth decay. Similarly, yoghurts and fromage frais should be plain and eaten as part of a snack or added to a dish of fresh, stewed or frozen fruit. Novelty varieties are mostly high in sticky sugar (fudge types) which clings to and decays the teeth.

Cheese, which is a concentrated source of calcium and minerals, helps to contribute to young children's dental health. A portion of cheese served as the main protein item in a meal counts as a portion from the meat, fish and alternatives sources of protein. However, because most cheeses are high in saturated fats, excessive intake is not recommended.

## MEAT, FISH, EGGS AND PULSES (also seeds and nuts)

Every main meal for young children should contain one or more portions of the foods from this group: they are our main sources of protein, iron and zinc. Non-vegetarian children should eat lean red meat at least twice a week for its iron, zinc and protein content (vegetarian children's main sources of protein will come from dairy foods, nuts and possibly fish; see below).

Processed meat products, such as burgers, nuggets, sausage rolls and pasties, which are mostly high in fat and salt, should always be avoided. Fresh or frozen unprocessed fish and canned tuna are important sources of protein. Oil-rich fish, such as sardines, kippers, salmon, mackerel and herring, contain valuable fatty acids such as Omega 3 and are rich sources of vitamin D. (Once again, processed products, such as fish-fingers, -shapes and -balls, which can be high in salt and poor-quality fats, should always be avoided. Note also that canned tuna loses its Omega 3 content in the canning process.)

Particularly for vegetarian children and for those without intolerances or allergies, nuts – whole or in paste form – are a good source of energy, protein and minerals. (Offering whole nuts to young children may pose a risk of choking and should be monitored very carefully.) Other vegetarian sources of protein include pulses, eggs, seeds, yoghurt, tofu and soya products. Pulses, including beans and lentils, can be added to soups, vegetable stews and curries to increase children's protein intake in a palatable form. Any processed vegetarian products resembling meat can be high in poor fats and salt and should be avoided.

## FATS, SUGARS AND SALT: FOODS TO BE RATIONED

Young children's intake of foods high in fat and salt and foods and drinks high in added sugar should be carefully controlled.

Foods in this 'high-risk' group include butter, spreads, cooking oils, sweet baked products (sticky cakes), chocolate and other confectionery, cold and hot sugary drinks, and sweet and savoury packaged commercial snacks.

However, monitored amounts of butter and other spreads (preferably unsalted), cooking oils, and fruit- and milk-based puddings and drinks can make an important and healthy contribution to children's diets. Rapidly growing young children need the concentrated energy that fat provides and the vitamins and minerals that fruit and milk contain. (All foods high in added sugar, salt and poor-quality fats should be consistently avoided. When eaten too often, they can contribute to obesity, tooth decay and overall poor health.)

Fat is a vital energy source for young children. For this reason, cooking margarines or spreads of any less than 40 per cent fat are to be discouraged. Low-fat spreads are not only low in energy, but they may also diminish the quality of the finished dish if used in cooking. Instead, use butter or spreads rich in monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats and oils (for example sunflower, safflower, olive or rapeseed oils).

Sugary and/or fizzy drinks should not feature in the school diet because of their significant contribution to tooth decay and overweight. Instead, young children should be offered milk or plain water throughout the day and unsweetened fruit juice (diluted) at meal times only. Instead of lactose, the naturally occurring sugar found in milk, fruit juices contain sugar and acids which cause tooth decay.

Read labels carefully in order to avoid the 'hidden' sugars or salt in breakfast cereals, bottled sauces and fruit squashes, and choose low- or no-sugar alternatives. Fruit drinks and squashes very often contain little or no actual fruit juice but are high in sugar, added colour and tooth-decaying acids.

