



St. Louis Children's Hospital believes the best care comes from more than just knowing how to deliver world-class medical treatment. It also comes from knowing that every child is unique, and helping parents understand why it's important to make mealtime fun and to incorporate balance, variety and moderation.

## NUTRITION AND HEALTHY HABITS

### Seven Keys to a Nutritious Lifestyle

**1. Teach healthy habits from the start.**

If children are encouraged to try a variety of foods from the start of their table-food days, eating well can become a lifelong habit. It can be easy for you to find a variety of foods from all categories of the food pyramid – grains, vegetables, fruits, milk, meats and beans, and oils – that your child will like. All it takes is a little planning and a strategy.

**2. Incorporate balance, variety and moderation.**

All food groups belong in a healthy diet. Organizing your visit to the grocery store will help ensure you come home with a variety of good tasting foods that are also good for your family's health. Youngsters need essential nutrients to grow strong muscles, bones and teeth as well as to maintain energy; thus, a child's diet has major impacts on his or her development.



Offering a healthy choice when your child is very hungry or asking to eat helps to strengthen the association of healthy foods being satisfying and tasty.



We want to help parents know how to answer the tough questions. Like, “Why do I have to eat my Brussels sprouts?”

### 3. **Respect your child’s preferences.**

Children have personal likes and dislikes, but disliking one food should not eliminate an entire food group. Those who don’t like broccoli may still enjoy green beans or asparagus; however, don’t give up on a food too quickly. If your child won’t eat broccoli the first time you serve it, try again. A new food may not get a fair chance if the child is feeling tired or crabby the first time it is served. Just like adults, children can acquire a taste for certain foods over time.

Serve a new food with a favorite and encourage children simply to taste the new item rather than insisting they eat a whole serving. A disliked food may need to be served 20 times before a child begins to like it. Parents can be positive role models by eating the same foods they encourage their children to eat. Be creative – if your child doesn’t like milk, try a smoothie, yogurt, frozen yogurt or hot cocoa.

Your imagination can be your best resource in helping your child have a healthy, well-balanced diet. Sometimes the unexpected makes mealtime more fun, both for parents and kids. So it’s okay to let your child eat anything nutritious at mealtime. If breakfast is a problem, for instance, don’t be afraid to serve a peanut butter sandwich, cold pizza or vegetables and dip. Or serve pancakes with fruit for dinner.

#### 4. Make snack time nutrition time.

For children, snacks should be part of a total nutrition plan. Because they burn lots of energy, children need a lot of calories. Plus it takes lots of calories just to grow! They can't get them all at meals because their stomachs are small, so snacks are an important way to pick up nutrients missed at a previous meal. It is important to think of snacks as nutritious gap-fillers, not treats.

Many foods that are commonly referred to as "junk food" (empty calories) are typically high in fat and sugar and low in nutritional value. It won't hurt a child to eat cookies, candy or chips occasionally, but make sure these foods don't replace nutritious foods.



Children have different calorie needs depending on their age, activity level, gender, weight and height. A 1 year-old needs about 1,000 calories a day and nearly every calorie needs to come from basic food groups. An 8 year-old, however, can eat 1,800 calories daily and cover basic needs in about 1,200 calories, leaving room for a few "fun" snacks.

Some very popular foods are, in fact, quite nutritious. Pizza, for example, covers three or four of the food groups. Low-fat cheese and yogurt are good supplements for a child who won't drink enough milk to meet his calcium requirements. And some cookies, such as vanilla wafers and animal crackers, contain low amounts of sugar.

#### 5. Make eating fun.

Children prefer foods that are brightly colored and fun, like sandwiches shaped with cookie cutters. An always-popular snack at St. Louis Children's Hospital is "ants on a log" – celery filled with peanut butter and topped with raisins. Planning nutritious, well-balanced meals and snacks is one of the most valuable gifts you can give your child.



As a point of reference, when checking a nutrition label for sodium content, 5% of the Daily Value is low and 20% is high.

When a child eats well, deliver plenty of praise. It will become evident that eating nutritious food is the best way to get lots of positive attention. Playing “airplane” or “choo-choo” with a child who won’t eat, rewards negative behavior and sends confusing signals to kids. If a child won’t eat, simply excuse him from the table.

**6. Don’t force joining the “Clean Plate Club.”**

Remember the “Clean Plate Club” and your mother insisting on “just one more bite”? Except in rare cases, a child’s body tells him how much food is needed. Put simply – when he’s hungry, he’ll eat. It is much more important to ensure that the food your child does eat is nutritious, than to focus on the serving size.

With the increase in obesity rates among children, pediatricians, dietitians and other health professionals stress the importance of developing healthy eating habits early in life. Learning to recognize when you are full and to stop eating, even if there is still food on your plate, is a skill necessary to maintain a healthy weight.

**7. Limit “convenience” and “fast” foods.**

While it is not a good idea to build a child’s diet around prepared “convenience” foods or restaurant “fast” foods, these can provide nutritious meals occasionally, if they are selected with the food pyramid in mind.

Many prepared foods, such as canned and frozen dinners, contain high levels of salt and fat, but an increasing number of these foods are being made with good nutrition in mind. Parents can evaluate food labels and choose those foods that contain less salt and fat than similar products. Whenever possible, choose foods that are labeled “reduced fat” or “reduced sodium.” However, foods that are marketed as “fat free” are not typically the best choice, as they are often higher in sodium and additives.



Look at the entire week, not one day, when assessing your child's diet.

(Limit "convenience" and "fast" foods, continued)

"Fast" foods also tend to contain too much salt and fat, but careful selection of items can make them fine for an occasional meal. Most of the food groups are covered with a hamburger, bun, milk and salad; omit or share an order of french fries. Grilled chicken sandwiches are healthier than hamburgers but breaded chicken patties, since they are fried, generally contain more fat than hamburgers. Not only do fried chicken and fish contain more fat, what we put on them adds even more: tartar sauce, mayonnaise and salad dressing are high in fat compared to mustard and catsup, which are fat free. Pizzas and tacos contain a variety of grain, milk, meat and vegetable products, too.

## Make Every Meal Count

### Breakfast

Breakfast should not be overlooked when planning meals for children. A good morning meal provides the energy to start off the day on the right foot. A quick, nutritious breakfast can consist of traditional morning foods – non-sweetened cereal, toast, a banana and milk – or non-traditional items such as yogurt, peanut butter on toast, cottage cheese with fruit or even pizza.

### Lunch

Lunches served in school cafeterias sometimes offer a healthy selection but on days when most of the meal consists of fried foods, children will likely eat a more nutritious meal if they bring their lunch from home.

By preparing lunches ahead of time, parents can provide appropriate nutritional choices for children. Again, try to cover the food pyramid - a sandwich made of lean meat (chicken, turkey, lean beef) on whole wheat bread, a piece of fresh fruit, veggie sticks, a pudding cup and milk.

### Dinner

Make mealtime enjoyable, have some laughs and conversation as a family. If parents will not be home by a traditional dinner time, plan an additional healthy snack to tide children over for an hour or two.

Use creativity when choosing dinners to include several food groups. For example, a taco bar is fun and could cover the grain, vegetable, dairy and protein groups with a whole grain tortilla, dark green lettuce, tomatoes, low-fat cheese, lean ground beef and beans.



Color is the key when choosing fruits and vegetables – shop the rainbow. If your child doesn't like one type of vegetable, replace it with a fruit or vegetable of the same color.



## Physical Activity is Important, Too

### **Remember the importance of exercise and heart-healthy habits.**

Exercise is helpful in many ways. Children who are physically active are more likely to be physically active as adults. The rate of heart disease within a country is strongly related to diet and activity practices. Studies have shown that Americans, compared to people in many other countries, are most likely to eat foods with saturated fats, have low activity levels, smoke and suffer from heart disease. Research repeatedly has shown that exercising, eating healthy foods and giving up smoking rewards adults with lower cholesterol, lower blood pressure and reduced risk for strokes and heart attacks. If parents make the time to join their children in exercise or sports, they can reinforce the idea that staying active is enjoyable and an important part of overall well-being.

Exercise helps control weight, reduce blood pressure and raise good cholesterol, all of which lead to good heart health. All children age 2 and older should join in at least 30 minutes of fun, moderately intense activities, such as walking fast, dancing or biking every day. They should also do at least 30 minutes of vigorous physical activity, such as running, swimming, doing aerobics or playing basketball, at least three to four days per week.

### **Encourage young people to exercise and practice healthy eating habits.**

Exercising regularly and eating nutritiously are habits. Many habits are formed during childhood, so there is no better time to learn the principles of healthy living. Research shows that preventing obesity is much easier than reversing obesity. Children who are obese have been shown to eat the same number of calories but exercise less than lean children.

Studies show that young people whose blood pressure and cholesterol levels are high have a greater chance of having high blood pressure and cholesterol as adults. Evidence also shows that hardening of the arteries, heart attack and stroke, which can be caused by inactivity and a diet high in saturated and trans fats, begins to develop during childhood. However, incorporating foods that contain Omega 3 fatty acids, such as fish, can reduce the risk of these diseases.

For youngsters over age 2, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that the level of fat in the daily diet not exceed 35 percent.



## Common Questions about Kids and Food

- **Is it OK for my child to consume sodium?**

Moderate amounts of sodium are needed to balance water and minerals and help muscles and nerves work properly. Most children need no more than 1,500 mg of sodium per day. Prepackaged foods that contain more than 400 mg of sodium per serving are considered high sodium foods.

- **What about fat?**

Infants who do not get enough fat in their diets may suffer from slow growth and development. Their bodies have to use other components of the diet – such as protein – for energy, and protein is a necessary building material for growth. For youngsters over age 2, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that the level of fat in the daily diet not exceed 35 percent.

- **I've heard that high-fiber foods can cause problems in children, is it true?**

Toddlers have small stomach capacities. High-fiber meals and snacks will leave little room for foods containing the calories and nutrients needed for growth. To calculate the daily amount of fiber that is appropriate for your child, add 5 grams to your child's age for the total number of grams he should consume.



- **How much is enough?**

A good rule of thumb for child-sized portions is to give one tablespoon of a food – meat, fruit, vegetable or grain – for each year of the child's age. A 4 year-old's serving of applesauce would be four tablespoons or 1/4 cup. But don't get hung up on details! Good nutrition is not tied up to a single meal – it's a process of offering nutritious food over a period of time. The key to good nutrition is variety and balance.

- **Are artificial sweeteners safe for children?**

Because research on artificial sweeteners indicates many adverse reactions, a general rule is to omit them from children's diets.

- **Are organic foods safer?**

US food safety laws and regulations cover all foods, regardless of production method. Pesticide residues are typically lower on organic products, however most products are well below government-established thresholds.

- **Does my child need to take a daily vitamin supplement or multivitamin?**

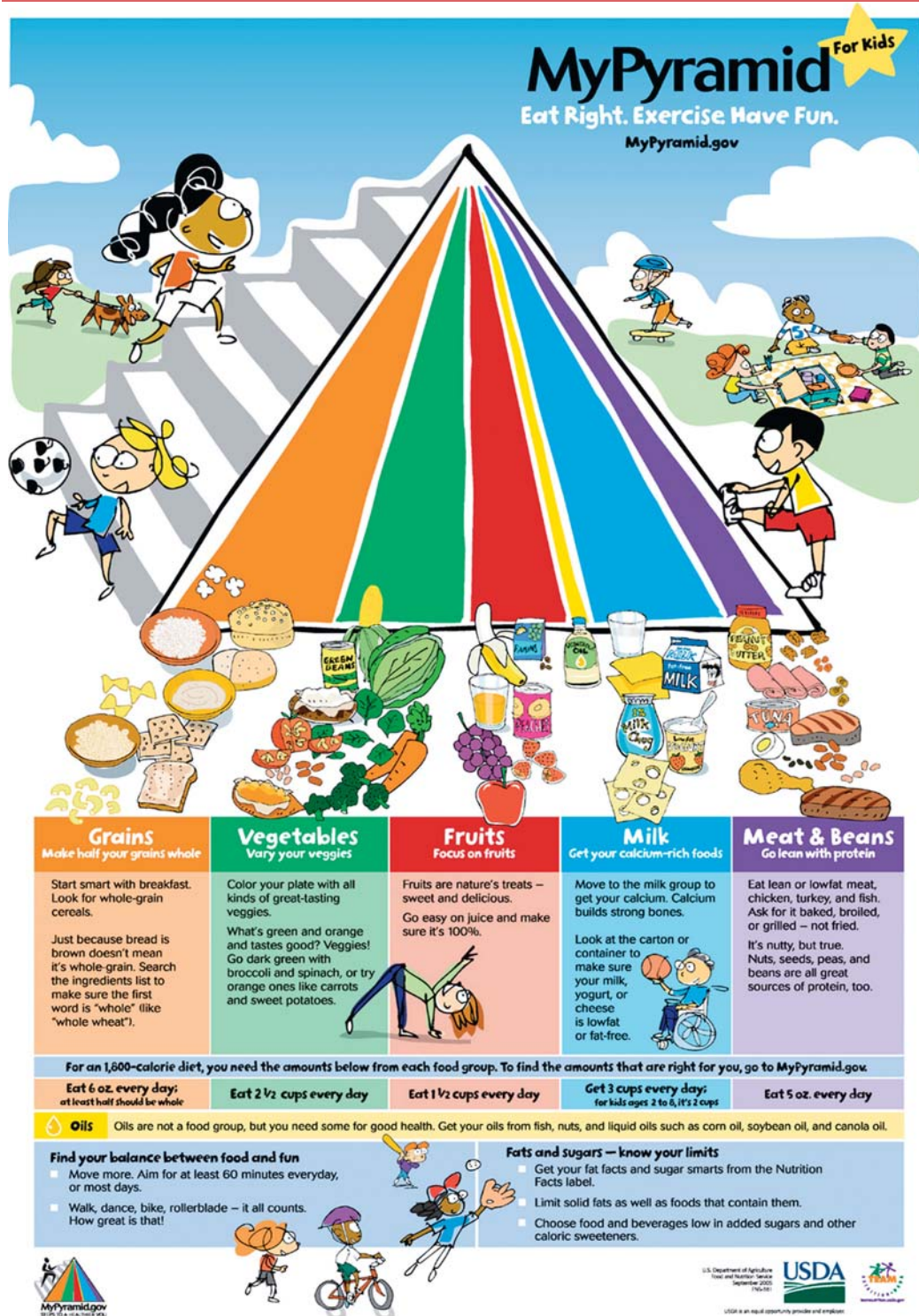
A well-balanced diet can provide the recommended daily allowance of vitamins and minerals. Ask your pediatrician for guidance specific to your child.



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The key to good nutrition is variety and balance.

**MyPyramid for Kids:** To create a personalized pyramid for your child, based on age, gender and physical activity level, visit [MyPyramid.gov](http://MyPyramid.gov)



## WE ARE READY FOR YOUR CALL

St. Louis Children's Hospital pursues knowing in everything we do.  
If you're interested in learning more about nutrition,  
or if you need assistance in choosing a pediatrician,  
our pediatric nurses can help.

Call the St. Louis Children's Hospital Answer Line at  
**314.454.KIDS (5437)** or **800.678.KIDS**.

[StLouisChildrens.org](http://StLouisChildrens.org)



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