

FOOD FOR HEALTH AND GROWTH HEALTHY EATING FOR SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN

Primary school age is the time children start enjoying busy social lives, have pocket money and begin to develop their own interests and lifestyle. Children of this age learn quickly and are influenced by friends and popular trends. This is the perfect time to learn about the importance of healthy food and physical activity.

FOOD NEEDS

The early and middle primary years are ones of slow and steady physical growth. Food provides children with energy, nutrients and a wonderful variety of tastes and textures. It is important to help children make good food choices by having a healthy range of foods available. Very low fat or restricted diets are usually not recommended, instead a healthy, balanced approach to eating and activity is suggested for all children.

Children need a wide variety of foods. Offer a range of foods from the following groups:

- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Breads and cereals
- Meat, fish, chicken, eggs, legumes
- Milk, cheese and yoghurt.

Processed foods such as chips, sweet biscuits and muesli bars are not needed.

If you are unsure how many serves of each of the different food groups your child needs, please refer to the table on the last page of this information sheet.

During primary school years, children move to a more traditional eating pattern of three main meals each day. For all children, a healthy snack at recess and after school is usually needed to keep them alert and 'on the go'. Allow your child to eat according to their appetite.

BREAKFAST

It is important to encourage children to eat breakfast. A good night's sleep followed by breakfast in the morning helps children stay active, concentrate at school and not get too hungry during the morning. Be a positive role model and let your child see you eat breakfast. Some great starters include:

- A bowl of breakfast cereal or porridge with milk
- Slices of grainy toast or fruit bread with spread
- Fresh or stewed fruit and yoghurt.

SCHOOL LUNCHES

Packed lunches from home are a great way for your child to learn about healthy food. Packaging can sometimes be tricky for little fingers – make sure your child is able to un-wrap the food in their lunchbox.

SOME LUNCH BOX IDEAS:

- A variety of breads and fillings. Try bread rolls, flat bread, foccacias, crispbread, rice or corn cakes, with fillings such as vegemite, peanut butter, cheese, tuna, egg, cold lean meats, baked beans, grated carrot, avocado and lettuce.
- A small drink of water or milk (freeze overnight) wrapped in a cloth in the lunchbox.
- Fresh or tinned fruit.
- Vegetable sticks with dips or a small container with mixed vegetables such as cherry tomatoes, and snow peas.
- Fruit yoghurts, these should stay cool in an insulated lunchbox.
- Cheese and grainy biscuits – either pre-packaged or your own homemade version.
- Homemade fruit muffins and cakes are a great way to include more fruit and vegetables some examples include sultana, carrot, zucchini, banana or pumpkin.

SCHOOL CANTEEN

Many schools have canteens and most children will use them. Schools may have a healthy canteen policy to support children making healthy food choices at school, however, without assistance your child may choose foods that are high in energy, low in nutrients, and often more expensive than food bought from home. It is best to limit the amount of money to spend at school or shops on the way home. While occasional lollies, chips and take-away foods do no harm, if eaten too often this may result in:

1. Poor intake of other foods that are nutritious
2. High energy intake and the risk of becoming overweight
3. Increased risk of tooth decay
4. Missed opportunity to teach your child about food preparation and planning.

Peer pressure to eat 'popular' foods at this age is strong – children can be influenced by television ads and marketing of food products. It's Okay to let your child enjoy these foods from time to time, for example at parties or special events.

DRINKS

Encourage children to drink and enjoy water. Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drink may cause health problems if consumed in large amounts.

Some children may drink less milk as they get older; this is not usually a problem if they are eating a range of dairy foods as well. Two to three serves of dairy foods such as cheese, yoghurt and milk are needed each day to provide enough calcium for bone development. Reduced fat and skim milk/dairy products are suitable for school aged children.

FAMILY MEALTIMES

Sitting down to eat as a family is a great chance to spend time together. Take time to eat together and relax at mealtimes, even if only a few times during the week. Try a late breakfast or lunch on the weekend with all the family.

- Encourage talking and sharing of daytime activities
- Avoid distractions such as television, radio or the telephone
- Offer a healthy family meal; allow children to leave an item if they say they do not like the food; do not offer different options to the family meal
- Help your child learn when they are hungry or full, don't argue about food
- Encourage children to help with preparing meals and shopping
- Discuss some simple nutrition messages such as 'milk helps keep your teeth and bones strong'.

ACTIVITY

Encourage school aged children to play actively every day. Active play helps children to grow and develop, improves focus, boosts confidence and self-esteem. It can also help protect against diseases in later life. Active play ensures children have the chance to improve motor skills. Playing outside rather than inside offers more opportunities for the body to move. All opportunities to walk, run, climb, push, pull, spin and dance creatively count.

Television, phone, and electronic games should not be used for more than two hours per day. Ideally no more than 60 minutes should be spent sitting or lying still during the daytime.

IMPORTANT TIPS FOR SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN

- Children need a variety of different foods each day.
- Snacks are an important part of a healthy diet for active children.
- Take healthy snacks and lunch from home or buy nutritious food from the canteen.
- Encourage children to drink plain water.
- Sweet drinks such as fruit juice, cordial and soft drink are not necessary.
- Plan to share meals as a family, enjoy sharing the day's happenings at mealtimes.
- Let children tell you when they are full.
- Let children help with food preparation and meal planning.
- Encourage physical activities for the whole family.
- Encourage your child to be physically active for at least 60 minutes every day.
- Outdoor free play in the most accessible and beneficial activity for children.

MORE INFORMATION ON THE FOOD GROUPS

Food Group	Good For	What is a serve?	How much is needed?	
Milk Group	Protein, carbohydrate and fat for energy and growth. Also contains vitamins and minerals such as calcium for strong bones and teeth.	250mL milk 200g yoghurt 40g cheese	2-3 serves each day	If your child has no milk, a calcium fortified soy alternative is recommended.
Bread & Cereal Group	Carbohydrate for energy, some protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals.	1 slice grain bread 4 wholemeal biscuits ½ cup rice or pasta Wholegrain breakfast cereal.	4-5 serves each day	Choose wholegrain varieties Avoid products with added sugar or fats.
Vegetables	Fibre, carbohydrate, vitamins and minerals.	½ cup cooked vegetables	4-5 serves each day	Supervise children eating raw carrot or celery
Fruit	Fibre, carbohydrate, sugar, vitamins and minerals.	1 piece fruit	1-2	
Meat Group	Rich in protein to build muscle and repair tissue	65g cooked meat, 80g cooked chicken 100g cooked fish 1 cup baked beans 2 eggs	1-2 serves each day	Alternatives to meat include 1 cup cooked chickpeas, lentils or 30g nuts