

Parent Webinar Series

Food for Thought: Tips and Strategies for Growing a Healthy Eater Frequently Asked Questions

Q: When we first introduced solid foods, my child would eat anything. Now that he's a toddler, he won't eat any vegetables. What changed and what do I do?

A: Children go through many phases while growing up and sometimes things are not what they seem. Toddlers like to begin asserting their authority as soon as they realize they can...just think about why it's called "the terrible twos"! Food is an easy target in this category, but with love and respect a parent can usually help turn that defiance into determination with a little positive feedback and encouragement. Behaviorally, try gently but firmly indicating that healthy foods will make him grow and that you are helping him by serving him the growing up foods. Use it as a way to praise his good/desired behavior and work up to the day when he actually asks you for broccoli...it can happen!

Start with something simple and generally well tolerated like raw carrots, maybe with a low fat ranch dressing or hummus dip to help make it more appealing. Many kids prefer raw over cooked vegetables, so carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, peas (even frozen peas) are often a hit. Just be careful to assure there is no risk of choking. You can also try to "hide" finely chopped or pureed veggies into soups, stews, meatloaf, even burgers, until your child becomes more amenable.

Finally, nutritionally speaking, if your child is eating fruits, especially apples, pears, oranges, melons, etc. he will be deriving many of the same vitamins/minerals that he would be getting from the veggies.

Q: My child will eat anything pureed, but when I try to offer the very soft cooked form (like carrots), she won't eat it. What do I do?

A: Relax. Many children are a little slower in advancing towards solids. The fact that she eats the pureed versions means that her nutritional status is not suffering. Also many children prefer to start with raw veggies and fruits instead of cooked. Depending upon the age and without risking choking if she is 2, you could start with raw carrots, peeled cucumber, even slices of green or red pepper just to begin transitioning to the veggies.

You can also chop them very fine and gradually introduce them into the puree to slowly get her accustomed to the new texture and flavor. Also finely chopped veggies in a chicken-noodle soup type dish are often enjoyed, especially if you let her dip her unsalted oyster or other mild cracker into the soup. It's a process and every child's pace is different.

Q: How much milk should a child consume each day? Do I offer whole milk, 1% or skim?

A: 3-4 cups of milk depending upon the age of the child are usually considered appropriate.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends whole milk under age 2, but new guidelines are in the works that will allow the gradual introduction of 2% as the child approaches age 2 if he/she is not a picky eater and does not need the extra fat calories.

Q: When do I introduce water to my child and how much should they be offered throughout the day?

A: Water can and should be introduced early on, even as early as the first month, as an alternative to breast milk or formula. For breast-fed babies this may be the first exposure to a bottle, just to provide a little opportunity to try both. Some babies will adapt sooner than others, but as with all new foods, repeated exposures might be needed to generate some interest and desire. There is no minimum requirement for water for babies, as long as they are drinking breast milk/formula they will derive the fluid they need.

Q: When can my child start feeding himself? When should he begin using utensils?

A: The age to introduce utensils can vary depending upon the child's hand-eye coordination and general interest in meal time participation. Starting with finger foods is usually the order of progression. Eventually you might then try giving them an "easy grip" spoon with a looped handle to hold and "play" eat with while you continue to reinforce the "real" food intake. Eventually the baby will prefer to do it himself, often with a lot of mess at first but with great satisfaction as you praise their efforts and congratulate them on even the smallest accomplishments!

Q: My child won't eat vegetables. Is it ok to hide them in things like cookies or macaroni and cheese?

A: There is a little debate about this. On one hand, sneaking veggies into desserts sends a mixed message. You are encouraging YOUR desserts, but not those that are served elsewhere which is a complicated message for a child. On the other hand, sneaking vegetables early and often into soups, stews, ground meat dishes and sauces/gravies or casseroles and every other entrée and side dish you make is a standard practice for many parents. If you are concerned about your child's vegetable intake, feel free to mix them in, but always serve some on the side in their true form so the child gets used to seeing, tasting and watching you eat veggies.

Q: Do I have to buy organic? Should I only offer my child natural things (ex. no sugar substitutes)?

A: There is no data to document the benefits of organic foods in babies or adults. The US Dietary Guidelines reviewed the literature and believe that the benefits of eating fruits and vegetables, meats/fish/poultry and dairy can easily be derived from non-organic sources if the child is healthy and not immune-compromised.

As the child grows and consumes LOTS of milk (a teenage boy for example who is a cross country runner could easily drink a quart a day) one might find that organic milk could help minimize breakouts and acne (a sometimes but not conclusive finding) but during baby-toddlerhood and given the amounts of foods normally consumed, this should not be necessary. Try to buy the best quality produce possible, wash it thoroughly and cook all meats/fish/poultry completely before serving.

There is also no data documenting adverse reactions from normal servings of sugar-substitutes however the American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend these on a routine basis. Since the average American diet is already sweetened in so many ways (eg sugar in catsup, salad dressings, processed foods, etc) NOT adding to it is a good practice to adopt, if possible.

If you do wish to sweeten something for a young child, a half teaspoon of sugar has <10 calories. If you wish to use an artificial sweetener like Nutra Sweet/Splenda/Truvia (less than 1 pkg per day) there are unlikely to be any adverse complications.

Q: It seems like almost every child is allergic to some kind of food. What is the likelihood that my child will have food allergies?

A: Food allergies are more common during the first 2-3 years of life. The new approach is to try to have your child “grow into” the potentially allergenic food through gradual exposure to that food over time. Though many children outgrow their food allergies, there are exceptions and times when a food allergy can be life-threatening. If in doubt or when there is concern, please check with your pediatrician.