

# Feeding Challenges



What to do when your child...

# ...refuses vegetables



You may worry when your child won't eat vegetables. Vegetables give us vitamins and minerals that we need. It's best not to force your child to eat them, though. Keep trying! A different approach may do the trick.

## Try some of these helpful hints:

- Serve and eat a variety of vegetables. Your eating habits will influence your child's habits. Set the example.
- Prepare vegetables so they keep their taste, texture, color, and vitamins. Cook lightly by steaming or stir frying, or try roasting. Many children prefer raw vegetables. They are crunchy and brightly colored. Try serving them with a dip, such as peanut butter, hummus, yogurt, fresh salsa, reduced-fat salad dressing, or bean dip.
- Have your child help prepare vegetables for a snack, salad, or dinner. Children are more likely to eat what they have helped to make. For younger children, pretend play can be a fun and interactive way for them to get involved.
- Have your child help you plant vegetable seeds. Watch them grow into something good to eat. You don't need a lot of space to plant a garden—try a sunny windowsill.

- Cut vegetables into shapes and give them fun names. Try carrot “coins,” pepper “pinwheels,” and broccoli “flowers.”
- Top cooked vegetables with low-fat grated cheese, or try a cheese or white sauce.
- Add vegetables to other foods. Add chopped vegetables to tomato sauce, meatloaf, pizza, omelets, or casseroles. Make soups using pureed vegetables, such as cream of broccoli, carrot, or spinach made with low-fat milk or vegetable stock.
- **And finally, don't give up. Try again. A child who refuses a vegetable the first time may enjoy it the second or third time around.**

## ...refuses to eat



Preschool children often go on a “hunger strike.” Try to find the reason behind it. Your child may be less hungry because he or she is in a slow growth stage. Or it may be about control. Refusing meals may be a new way to assert him- or herself.

## Ask yourself:

- Does your child refuse to eat at meals because he or she is filling up on snacks or drinks throughout the day?
- Are mealtimes relaxed and pleasant for the family?
- Do you expect your child to eat more than he or she can?
- Do you serve foods in forms young children can manage easily, such as bite-sized pieces or finger foods?
- Are the foods you serve appealing? Try variety in the:
  - Size and shape (rounds, sticks, cubes)
  - Texture (crisp, soft)
  - Flavor (strong, mild, sweet, sour)
  - Form (cooked, raw)
  - Color (green, red, yellow, orange)

## Tips to make life easier during these stages:

- Accept the hunger strike calmly. Try not to react strongly when your child refuses to eat. Your child's refusal to eat is probably not your fault.
- Give your child the extra attention he or she may be looking for between (not during) meals.
- Spend some quiet time with your child before a meal, such as reading a story or singing a song.
- Serve the same meal to the whole family, and let your child decide whether to eat or not. Try not to feed your child until the next scheduled snack or meal.
- Many children go on food strikes for a day or two. This is normal and is not likely to do any harm. Before you know it, your child will be eating again.
- If your child is still not eating after a few days, talk to a doctor to be sure your child is not ill.
- When offering new foods to children, try it when they are starting to feel hungry. Don't wait until they are really hungry because they may reject the new food.

# ...is overweight



Sometimes, feeding challenges may be linked to weight gain. Three of the most common reasons for obesity in growing children are drinking calories, overeating, and not being active enough. Serving your children healthy foods in the right amounts, offering water, and helping them be more active each day can help control their weight. Taking part in active play and sports also helps children build muscle, learn new skills, and share with other children.

## To help your child reach a healthy weight:

- Remember 5-2-1-0.
  - 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables each day.
  - 2 hours or less of screen time a day.
  - 1 hour of physical activity each day. Let your child try many ways to be active. Try swimming, dancing, skating, biking, hiking, and walking. It helps to get the whole family involved in being active.

- 0 sugar-sweetened drinks (soda, fruit drinks, chocolate milk, and juice). These can add hundreds of extra calories each day. Serve water or low-fat or nonfat milk instead.
- Your eating habits affect your child’s habits. Set the example.
- Teach your child to eat slowly, chew food well, and enjoy it—not gobble it up.
- Serve healthy meals and snacks at regular times.

- Prepare a healthy plate for your child. Fill half the plate with nonstarchy vegetables, one-quarter with a whole grain or potato, and one-quarter with protein (beans, meat, poultry, or fish). Add a cup of milk and a piece of fruit for dessert.



- Serve nonfat or 1% low-fat milk if your child is older than 2.
- Offer water after children have had the right amount of milk.
- Serve your child a portion size right for his or her age (not adult size).
- Limit eating to the dining table—not the bedroom, family room, or in front of the TV.
- Do not use food as a reward or punishment. Instead, offer a hug, play a game with your child, go for a walk, or take your child on an outing.
- If other people care for your child, such as a day care provider, grandparents, siblings, or friends, make sure they know your concerns about your child’s diet. You can all work together.
- Do not criticize or shame a child about his or her weight.
- A weight loss diet should not be used for most children, unless your child’s doctor advises it.

## ...snacks



Snacks can be an important part of your child's diet. Children have small stomachs. They may not eat enough food at mealtimes to meet their energy needs or to avoid being too hungry before the next meal. Choose healthy snacks.

### **Guidelines for healthy snacking:**

- Offer one small, healthy snack midway between meals. This way your child will not get into the habit of refusing meals because he or she knows a snack is soon to follow. This will also keep your child from "grazing" all day.
- Plan ahead so you can offer the most nutritious snacks to your child. Snack time is a good time to let your child try new healthy foods.
- Limit processed, packaged snack foods like chips, snack cakes, cookies, fruit drinks, soda, and candy. These foods are high in calories, sugar, fat, and/or salt, while adding few nutrients. This doesn't mean that you can't ever serve these foods. They give energy, which a growing child needs, but they should not be used instead of foods with more nutrients.



- Be careful about giving seeds, nuts, carrots, grapes, and popcorn to children under age 3. These foods may cause choking.

## Nutritious snack ideas:

- **Vegetable Snacks**

Cut up fresh, raw vegetables. Serve with hummus, old-fashioned peanut butter, cheese, yogurt, cottage cheese, or homemade dips. Try:

- broccoli
- carrots
- cauliflower
- celery
- cucumber
- cherry tomatoes
- jicama
- zucchini
- edamame

- **Fruit Snacks**

Use whole, sliced, or dried fruits. Serve with old-fashioned peanut butter, cottage cheese, yogurt, ricotta cheese, or milk. Try:

- apples
- berries
- melon
- apricots
- grapefruit
- peaches
- pineapple
- grapes
- unsweetened applesauce
- bananas
- frozen grapes or bananas

- **Whole-Grain Snacks**

- Crackers with sliced cheese or old-fashioned peanut butter
- Corn tortilla with low-fat cheese or fat-free refried beans

- **Protein Snacks**

Try nuts, seeds, nut butters, turkey or chicken cubes, beans, a hard-boiled egg, or cheese cubes.

# ...won't drink milk

Milk and milk products provide vital nutrients, including calcium, vitamin D, B vitamins, and protein. These help with the building and growth of bones and teeth. However, if your child chooses not to drink milk, that's OK. You can substitute with plant-based, calcium-fortified options. A well-balanced diet supplies calcium.

## Try these tips:

- Offer milk products such as cheese, yogurt, and cream soup instead of milk. In place of a glass of milk, serve:
  - 1 ounce of hard cheese (1-inch cube)
  - yogurt (plain is better; dress it up with fresh fruit)
  - 1 cup of cream soup (prepared with low-fat milk)
- If your child will not drink milk, he or she may have a hard time digesting the sugar in milk (lactose intolerance) or have a milk allergy. Try lactose-free milk or soy, almond, or rice milk with added calcium and vitamin D.
- Other foods that have calcium are tofu, soy or almond milk, and leafy vegetables such as turnip greens, collards, kale, and broccoli.
- Some children will drink chocolate milk, but it has added sugar and more calories. Serve it only as a treat.
- Try healthy milkshakes or smoothies made with fresh fruit, and have your child help make them.



### FRUIT SMOOTHIE

1 cup 1% milk or plant-based milk (vitamin D and calcium-fortified)

¼ cup fresh or frozen berries **or** ½ banana

¼ cup yogurt

Blend milk, fruit, and yogurt in a blender. Serves 2 to 3.

**Note:** Children 2 and older should drink 1% low-fat or nonfat milk.

# Resources for Parents

- *Child of Mine: Feeding with Love and Good Sense*, by Ellyn Satter
- *Deceptively Delicious: Simple Secrets to Get Your Kids Eating Good Food*, by Jessica Seinfeld
- *Fed Up! Winning the War Against Childhood Obesity*, by Susan Okie, MD
- *Kids, Carrots, and Candy: A Practical, Positive Approach to Raising Children Free of Food and Weight Problems*, by Jane R. Hirschmann and Lela Zaphiropoulos
- *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*, by Ellyn Satter
- *Your Child's Weight: Helping without Harming*, by Ellyn Satter
- Kaiser Permanente website: [kp.org/children](https://www.kp.org/children)



