



Healthy Snacks for Toddlers and Preschoolers

Growing children need more food energy than they can consume during a single meal. Therefore, nutritious, well-planned snacks are an important and necessary part of a child's diet. Snacks can account for up to 20 percent of children's nutrient needs, and help maintain their energy between meals. Offering snacks at regular intervals between meals encourages children to not eat on demand all day or refuse a meal because they know a snack is soon to follow. It is helpful to think of snack time as a planned mini-meal and not a spur of the moment indulgence. Remember that snacks should not replace a meal, but rather provide a valuable supplement.

With a little planning it is easy to choose and prepare snacks that have child appeal and are nutritious. Textures should be chewy, soft or crisp, not tough. Flavors should be mild, and neither too salty or too spicy. Temperatures should not be too cold or too hot. Colors should be bright and (when possible) shapes should be fun and interesting. Serving portions should fit the child's needs depending upon his or her age and size. When preparing snacks for young children, the emphasis should be on healthy food choices, and avoiding foods a child is allergic or intolerant of and those that might be choking hazards.

If you are participating in the Child Care Food Program (CCFP), be sure you choose foods that are reimbursable and that you serve the appropriate portion size based on the child's age. For additional resources or information on the Child Care Food Program call your local resource and referral agency or the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program in your area.

Important

1. **Choking Hazards:** Young children can easily choke on nuts, seeds, popcorn, raw vegetables, grapes, peanut butter, meat sticks and hot dogs. Do *not* give these foods to infants. Cut foods into

small, easily chewed finger food for toddlers and preschoolers who are still learning to bite and chew. Watch children of all ages closely whenever they are eating.

2. **Food Allergy:** An offending food triggers an allergic reaction by the immune system. Foods that are common allergens include peanuts, tree nuts (walnuts, pecans, etc.), shellfish, fish, milk, soy, wheat and eggs. If a child in your care has a nut allergy, you must have an Epi-pen available at all times. A care plan from the child's health provider, plus training on how to use the Epi-pen from a public health nurse, the child's health provider, or the parent is also required. For more information regarding allergies, visit www.foodallergy.org.
3. **Food Intolerance:** An adverse physical reaction to a food or food additive that does not involve one's immune system.

Healthy Snack Ideas

Fruit-type Snacks

Canned fruit packed in light syrup or water is also acceptable.

- choose small, whole fruits in season to reduce cost and waste
- cut in slices or halves for variety, and serve plain or with cottage cheese, ricotta cheese, or yogurt (dairy or soy)
- raisins and other dried fruits
- apple ring sandwiches (creamy peanut butter* on apple rings)
- frozen fruit cups (freeze pureed or crushed fruit and allow to soften slightly in the fridge before serving)

- homemade popsicles (freeze any 100 percent fresh fruit juice, except pineapple juice which does not freeze well, and pour it into small paper cups or ice cube trays, insert popsicle sticks, and freeze until solid; then remove popsicle from cup by running under hot water for about 10 seconds. Blending yogurt with the fruit juice is another option)

Fresh Vegetable–type Snacks

(frozen or canned vegetables without added sodium are also acceptable)

- soft-cooked vegetables—carrots, asparagus, green beans, pea pods, sweet potato strips, broccoli or cauliflower served with a cottage cheese, hummus, or yogurt (dairy or soy) dip
- green pepper slices, tomato wedges or zucchini strips served with creamy peanut butter, cream cheese or cottage cheese
- grilled cheese and tomato sandwiches, or cheese and veggie quesadillas.

* Avoid “chunky” peanut butter, raw celery and carrots because they are a choking hazard.

Dairy–type Snacks

- yogurt with applesauce or pureed fruit
- flavored or plain yogurt (dairy or soy) or cottage cheeses combined with fruit
- pudding
- slices of cheese or “string” cheese (dairy or soy)
- homemade frozen “juice pops” with calcium-fortified juices (combine yogurt—dairy or soy—with 100 percent fruit juice, and add pureed or very soft fruit)
- fruit shake (blend together cow’s milk or soy / rice milk with fruit and add a dash of cinnamon and nutmeg)

Use low-fat products only for children over 5 years old.

Bread–type Snacks

- mini flavored rice or corn cakes
- pumpkin, zucchini, banana, or cranberry bread
- bran, corn, apple, banana, or blueberry muffins
- homemade soft pretzels or bread sticks
- non-sugared cereals

- whole grain crackers, breads or bagels with various soft cream cheese spreads, creamy peanut butter, jelly, cottage cheese or hummous

Meat–type Snacks

- hard cooked eggs (wedges or slices)
- kabobs made with any combination of cheese, fruit, vegetables and sliced or cubed cooked meat or tofu (*remove the toothpicks before serving!*)
- pita pocket filled with lean sliced meat, tuna, hummous, tofu, cheese (dairy or soy), lettuce and/or tomato
- English muffins or pita bread topped with tomato sauce, grated cheese (soy or dairy) and lean cuts of meats or tofu, baked, and cut into quarters
- pita bread, flour or corn tortillas with beans or canned chili, sprinkled with grated cheese (soy or dairy), and topped with plain yogurt or sour cream if desired

Notes to Remember

- If using dairy, soy products or citrus fruits, be sure children are not allergic or intolerant to them before serving.
- Limit liquids as snacks. Avoid juice drinks, sodas, or soft drinks, in particular those with caffeine. Use only juices that are 100 percent juice. And always encourage children to drink plenty of water.
- Avoid offering high-sugar cookies, doughnuts, brownies and similar other baked goods (such as Oreos, Hostess Cupcakes, etc.). Avoid snack foods that will stick to the children’s teeth and the roof of their mouths, which may cause gagging and can contribute to dental decay.
- Don’t be swayed by advertising, as many prepared foods (such as Lunchables) are marketed as kid-friendly, but are actually poor in nutrition.

Resources

Team Nutrition Child Care Organization. Provides recipes, resources and information on preparing nutritious meals and food safety. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/child-care-organization>

Dairy Council of California at <https://www.healthyeating.org/>.

2003