

# Nutrition in Children Six Years and Older

## Why is nutrition so important in children six and older?

There is a natural increase in appetite and activity level during these years. Good nutrition is necessary for normal growth of the body and brain and to maintain a healthy immune system. And it's never too early to learn good eating habits. A balanced diet can help prevent weak bones, heart disease, diabetes and obesity, now and in the future.

## What if a child doesn't eat?

Few children eat as much food as a parent would like them to, but it's what they eat that's important, not necessarily how much. A healthy child will not starve. Many children like frequent, small meals or snacks throughout the day rather than several regular, big meals at traditional times. Even if the child doesn't want to eat, encourage him to sit with the family at mealtime and share the events of the day. Rules such as "you eat when we eat or not at all" create problems for children whose appetite is different from the family pattern. Working with your child's needs is not "giving in" or "spoiling."

## What factors can affect appetite?

**Inactivity.** There is an alarming increase in the incidence of obesity, dental cavities, iron deficiency anemia and cardiovascular disease in children. It's up to parents to set the limits (less than two hours a day) on TV, computer and videogame use, and encourage outdoor play. It helps if these things are not located in the child's room.

*Soda, milk and juice* are filling and can curb appetite. Serve low-fat or non-fat milk, and 100 percent fruit juice, well diluted with water. Juice has a lot of sugar in it. A parent has little control over what foods the older child is getting outside the home, but you can control what you keep in the house. If the candy, soda, etc. are not there, neither is the temptation. **Diet soda** and **regular soda** have additives which are not good for growing children. Regular soda has so much sugar and additives that it would be "healthier" to give your child a bowl of sugar and water to eat.

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## What about picky eaters?

Don't make a big deal out of it. There are worse things than eating peanut butter and banana sandwiches every day for weeks on end. Let children help shop, cook and pack their own lunches. A child is more likely to eat (or at least try) something if she's helped plan and prepare it.

## How will I know if my child is getting enough vitamins and minerals?

Children do not need a vitamin supplement if they are eating a variety of grains, fruits and vegetables most days. Dairy products, beans, tofu, eggs, meat in small amounts, and dark green leafy vegetables supply protein, iron and calcium which support the growth needs of children. The vitamins and minerals from fresh foods are much better than supplements.

## When should I worry?

Almost never, unless a child is ill, obese, losing weight, or eating only junk food. Take your child to see the pediatrician or nurse practitioner for regular check-ups, and get their recommendations regarding your individual child's growth pattern and nutritional needs.

Remember, children strive to be like their parents, so model good habits and eat healthy.

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