



Snacks

"Don't eat that, you'll spoil your appetite." If only you had a dollar for every time you heard that familiar refrain growing up.

But if the right foods are offered at the right times, snacks can play an important role in managing your child's hunger and boosting nutrition. A well-timed snack can even out spikes in hunger and provide a much-needed energy boost between meals. Snacks can keep younger children from getting so hungry that they become cranky, and they can also keep older children from overeating at larger meals. And for picky eaters of all ages, snacks can be added insurance that your child is getting the nutrients needed.

This doesn't mean that giving your child a cupcake half an hour before dinner is suddenly considered a good idea. The best snacks will be nutritious — low in sugar, fat, and salt. Fresh fruit and vegetables and foods that contain whole grains and protein are also good choices.

But it's not just about what you offer as a snack — it's how much you serve and when. Pay attention to portion sizes and timing of snacks so they don't interfere with a child's appetite for the next scheduled meal.

Kids who are allowed to graze all day long often have a hard time figuring out when they're truly hungry — one key to maintaining a healthy weight in childhood and later in life. A structured meal and snack schedule is one solution. You offer the meals and snacks at the same times each day, and your child can decide what he or she wants to eat and how much.

Snacking Through the Years

Snacks have a place in the diets of kids from toddlers to teens. Here's how:

Toddlers

Toddlers' eating habits can often be, quite literally, for the birds: a peck on the plate at breakfast, another peck at lunch. Very young children may not eat much at a sitting and they often get hungry before the next meal. At this age, children may need to eat five or six times a day — three meals and two to three snacks.

There are two common "snack pitfalls" to avoid with toddlers because once done, they can be hard to undo. The first is using sweets to reward good behavior. This sends the message that desserts are somehow better, or more valuable, than other foods, which can start a pattern of unhealthy eating. The second is pacifying your child with a snack just before a meal. This can decrease your child's hunger and make him or her less willing to try new foods at the table.

Structured snacks, given at approximately the same times every day, not only give your child a sense of control, but also establish that snacks are available only at certain times. Offer two or three nutritious choices and let your child choose. Here are some possibilities:

- low-sugar, whole-grain breakfast cereals

- cut-up fruit (if pieces are small and soft enough to avoid choking)
- graham crackers
- cheese slices cut into fun shapes

Preschoolers

Control is still a key issue at this age, so preschoolers also might enjoy the chance to choose their snack from the options you present. The desire for sweets can be quite strong at this age, but you can avoid the struggles. Don't offer candy and cookies at snack time. You can decide not to stock them at all or, if you do, to keep them out of your child's sight.

Preschoolers are just learning to label their feelings, and they'll often say "I'm hungry." The trouble is they could be just bored, tired, or in need of some attention. Try to figure out what your child really needs. It may be that some playtime with you or a change of scenery could cause the cries of "I'm hungry" to subside. Also, when your child does need a snack, make sure it's eaten at the table and not in front of the TV.

Healthy snacks for preschoolers include:

- applesauce
- yogurt
- low-fat granola
- raisins
- veggie sticks topped with peanut butter
- whole-grain crackers topped with cheese
- fruit smoothies

School-Age Children

With homework, activities, lessons, and sports, school-age children are busier, and probably more independent, than ever. Some school-age kids may still need three meals and two snacks per day — usually one mid-morning and one after school. But depending on their lunch time at school, and as kids get older, the morning snack could be unnecessary. Talk with your child to find out. Unless you have an especially early dinner time, most kids still need an after-school snack. They can help kids stay focused and alert for homework and other after-school commitments.

If your child has an activity after school, it's best to pack a healthy snack. A child who comes straight home after school might start fixing his or her own snacks (with permission first, of course). Leave things in the fridge that can be tossed together quickly — veggie sticks and dips, yogurt and berries. If you're serving fruit or a salad with dinner, consider letting your child eat that early to take the edge off.

School-age children are capable of understanding why it's important to eat healthy, but more than ever they look to the people they love as role models. Make healthy snacking a family affair and your child will take it to heart.

Here are some snacks that school-age children might enjoy:

- low-sugar, whole-grain breakfast cereal with low-fat milk
- low-fat string cheese
- fruit smoothies made with low-fat milk or yogurt
- nuts and raisins
- whole-wheat pita slices, cut up veggies, and hummus

- whole-grain pretzels
- fruit slices dipped in low-fat flavored yogurt

Teens

Teens might still need a snack or two during the day, but what they eat may seem out of your control. Your teen might have sports, a job, an ever-expanding social calendar, money to spend, and car keys. With this much independence, you can't police what your child eats, but you can encourage healthy snacking by keeping nutritious foods at home for your teen to take on the go.

Healthy snacks for teens include:

- veggie sticks with low-fat ranch dip or hummus
- low-fat granola or cereal bars
- fresh or dried fruit
- trail mix
- mini bran muffins
- air-popped popcorn
- hard-boiled eggs

Snacking well can be a challenge, especially once your child is old enough to make independent food choices. But if you've set the stage right from the start — offering mostly nutritious choices at home and encouraging good alternatives when away — your child is more likely to reach for something healthy when a hunger pang strikes.

Reviewed by: Mary L. Gavin, MD

Date reviewed: February 2006

[About Us](#) / [Contact Us](#) / [Partners](#) / [Editorial Policy](#) / [Privacy Policy & Terms of Use](#)



Note: All information on KidsHealth is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.

©1995-2008 The Nemours Foundation. All rights reserved.