

Choosing Healthy Snacks for Children

Snacks are part of a healthy diet for children. Creating a meal and snack pattern can help to provide children nutritious food throughout the day. Because younger children do not always eat enough at a meal, providing one to two snacks per day can help them get the nutrients they need. Snacks should not take the place of meals. If children refuse meals because of too much snacking, offer smaller snacks or fewer snacks throughout the day.

How many snacks/meals are needed?

Generally one or two snacks are enough.

- breakfast
- **midmorning snack**
- lunch
- **midafternoon snack**
- dinner

What kinds of foods make healthy snacks?

Using USDA's My Plate can help you decide.



- *Vegetables and fruit:* Half the plate or half the snacks should be vegetables and fruit. Vegetables and fruit are rich in vitamins, minerals and fiber. Focus on non-starchy vegetables. Eat a rainbow: dark, leafy greens, orange-yellow squash and melon, red bell peppers and berries, white cauliflower and bananas, and purple plums and eggplant.
- *Carbohydrates:* When it comes to bread, crackers, pretzels, pasta and cereals, choose whole grain. Whole grains provide fiber, B vitamins and iron.

- *Protein:* There are many healthy choices, including beans, nuts, seeds, eggs, fish and lean meats such as chicken, beef or wild game. Protein is important for muscles and body maintenance. Protein-rich foods contain nutrients such as vitamin E, some B vitamins, zinc and iron.
- *Dairy:* Choose skim or 1 percent milk, low-fat yogurt or cheese, or use dairy alternatives such as soy milk, almond milk or tofu. Dairy foods and most dairy alternatives provide calcium, which is necessary for bone strength.
- *Fats:* Lean toward unsaturated plant-based fats. Good choices include olive oil, canola oil, other vegetable oils, nuts, seeds and avocados. Fats/oils are not a food group, but they contain essential fatty acids, which our bodies need in small amounts.

Simple snack ideas

(See recipes for dips, fillings and granola on following pages.)

- *Vegetables and dip:* Serve carrots, celery, bell pepper strips or baby tomatoes with a dip.
- *Apple slices and nut butters:* Serve with peanut butter or other nut butters.
- *Fruit and dip:* Dip bananas, melon slices, apple slices, strawberries or orange segments in low-fat vanilla yogurt or a fruit dip.
- *Tortilla roll-ups:* Wrap spinach/lettuce, cream cheese, turkey or other sandwich fillings in whole-grain tortillas.
- *Grape lollipops:* Use grapes and whole-grain stick pretzels. Put a grape on the end of the pretzel and you have a lollipop!
- *Quesadilla:* Top a whole-grain tortilla with grated cheese; you can add diced bell pepper.

Melt the cheese on the tortilla on a skillet on the stove or in the microwave. Serve with salsa.

- *Sandwich shapes*: Create a sandwich with whole-grain bread and fillings you have on hand. Cut out fun shapes with cookie cutters.
- *Yogurt parfait*: Make alternate layers of low-fat vanilla or plain yogurt and cut-up fresh fruit or applesauce in a glass. Top with a sprinkle of granola and/or nuts.
- *Fruit smoothies*: Blend fresh or frozen berries, bananas and milk or yogurt.
- *Whole-grain crackers*: Serve with a dip* or top them with sandwich filling*.

Note: Snack foods such as nuts, seeds, popcorn, whole cherries, grapes and raw carrots are not recommended for children under the age of 4 because of choking risk.

How do I get my child to try new foods?

Some children do not like the idea of trying new foods. Here are some tips:

- Be a good example. Try new foods with your child. Talk about when you were unsure of a new food and then found that you liked it.
- Offer small amounts of a new food. This way the new food is not overwhelming.
- Offer the new food when your child is hungry. He may be more willing to try it when he is not filled with a familiar food first.
- Do not force your child to eat a new food. Offer it at more than one occasion. It can take many times of exposure to know if you like a new flavor.

Safe food handling and storage

- Always wash your hands for 20 seconds with warm water and soap before preparing and serving food. If children are helping to prepare food, have them wash their hands too.
- Wash fruit and vegetables before preparing them.
- Use a clean cutting board, knife and other utensils and bowls when preparing food.
- If packing snacks in a lunch bag or to go, be sure to include cold gel packs or ice packs to keep foods from spoiling, and pack in an insulated bag.

Recipes for Snacks

Dips for Vegetables and Crackers

Cucumber Yogurt Dip

Ingredients

- 2 cups plain low-fat yogurt
- 2 large cucumbers, peeled, seeded and grated
- ½ cup low-fat* sour cream (*kids need some fat for energy and brain development)
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon fresh dill
- 1 garlic clove, chopped

Directions

1. Peel, seed and grate one cucumber. Slice other cucumber and set aside.
2. Mix yogurt, grated cucumber, sour cream, lemon juice, dill and garlic in a serving bowl. Chill for 1 hour.

Chick Pea Dip/Hummus

Ingredients

- 2 cups garbanzo beans (chickpeas), cooked
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ¼ cup lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon sesame tahini (sesame paste), or substitute peanut butter for a sweet taste
- 2 tablespoons olive oil

Directions

1. Mash the garbanzo beans until smooth. If you have a blender, put the beans and lemon juice into it and blend.
2. Add the garlic, lemon juice, tahini and oil. Mix well.

Dip for Fruit

Nut Butter Dip for Fruit

Ingredients

- ½ cup plain yogurt
- ½ teaspoon of vanilla
- ⅓ cup peanut butter, or use other nut or seed butters

Directions

1. Combine yogurt, vanilla and peanut butter in a bowl.
2. Mix well.

3. Chill dip in refrigerator until ready to serve.

Nutrition facts: calories, 90; calories from fat, 60; total fat, 7 g; saturated fat, 1.5 g; trans fat, 0 g; cholesterol, 0 mg; sodium, 80 mg; total carbohydrate, 5 g; fiber, 1 g; protein, 4 g

Source: Eating Smart-Being Active Curriculum, USDA, Expanded Food and Nutrition Program.

Sandwich Fillings

Chicken Apple Salad

Ingredients

- 2½ cups chicken breast, cooked and diced
- ½ cup celery, chopped
- ¼ cup onion, chopped
- 2 tablespoons pickle relish
- ½ cup mayonnaise, light

Directions

1. Combine all ingredients.
2. Refrigerate until ready to serve.
3. Use within one to two days. Chicken salad does not freeze well.

How to use:

1. Make chicken salad sandwiches.
2. Make a pasta salad by mixing with 2 cups cooked pasta.
3. Serve in a tomato or a cucumber boat; kids will love this.

Tofu Salad

Ingredients

- ¾ pound firm tofu
- 2 tablespoons reduced-calorie mayonnaise
- 3 teaspoons brown mustard
- ½ teaspoon low-sodium soy sauce
- ½ cup celery, diced
- 1 tablespoon onion, diced
- ½ green pepper, seeded and diced
- 1 tablespoon parsley, minced

Directions

1. Prepare tofu by draining the water from the package and placing tofu between two plates. Put a heavy object on top and let stand for 10-15 minutes. Drain the water that collects on the bottom plate every few minutes.

2. In a small bowl, mix the mayonnaise, mustard and soy sauce.

3. In a medium bowl, combine the diced tofu, celery, onion, pepper and parley; stir in the mayonnaise mixture and toss gently to coat.

4. Refrigerate covered until the flavors are blended, at least 1 hour.

5. Use as a sandwich filling or on top of whole grain crackers.

Tuna or Salmon Salad

Ingredients

- 1 can (5-6 ounces) tuna, drained OR 1 pouch (6-7 ounces) tuna
- ¼ cup celery, chopped
- ¼ cup mayonnaise (light)

Other ingredient options:

- 3 tablespoons green onion, chopped
- ¼ cup chopped apples, cucumbers, slivered almonds or green pepper for added zest

Directions

Combine all ingredients in a medium bowl. Stir to combine.

Salmon Spread

Ingredients

- 1 can (15½ ounces) salmon
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 8 ounces yogurt, plain, fat-free
- 1 tablespoon dried dill weed
- 4 chopped green onions (or ¼ cup onion)
- parsley for garnish

Directions

Drain salmon and flake with a fork in to a bowl. Mix in all other ingredients.

Serve on bread, crackers or a rice cake.

Granola Recipes

Awesome Granola

Ingredients

- 3 cups oatmeal (uncooked)
- ½ cup coconut (shredded or flaked)
- 1 cup pecans (chopped, walnuts or peanuts)
- ¼ cup honey
- ¼ cup canola oil
- 1½ teaspoons cinnamon
- ⅔ cup raisins

Directions

1. Heat oven to 350°F. Combine all ingredients except raisins in a large bowl; mix well.
2. Bake in 13×9-inch baking pan at 350°F for 25-30 minutes or until golden brown. Stir every 5 minutes.
3. Stir in raisins. Cool thoroughly. Store in tightly covered container.

Electric Skillet Instructions:

1. Combine all ingredients except raisins in a large microwave safe bowl; mix well.
2. Set electric skillet at 300°F and stir mixture constantly until lightly browned.
3. Place in a bowl and stir in raisins. Cool thoroughly.
4. Store in tightly covered container.

Microwave Instructions:

1. Combine all ingredients except raisins in a large microwave safe bowl; mix well.
2. Place in 11×7-inch glass baking dish.
3. Cook at HIGH about 8 minutes or until golden brown, stirring after every 2 minutes of cooking; stir in raisins.
4. Place on ungreased cookie sheet or aluminum foil to cool. Cool thoroughly. Store in a tightly covered container.

Cinnamon Vanilla Granola

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons honey
- ½ cup water
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 4 cups uncooked rolled oats (oatmeal)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon salt

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 275°F.
2. Mix honey, water, vegetable oil, vanilla extract, cinnamon and salt in a large bowl.
3. Stir in oats; mix well.
4. Spread mixture in a thin layer on a cookie sheet.
5. Bake for 20 minutes. Remove from oven; stir, mixture well, and return to oven.
6. Bake 20 more minutes and stir as before.
8. Break into small pieces with spatula.
9. Cool and store in a covered container.

Note: Children under the age of 1 should not consume honey.

References

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. 2014. "Eat Right Children's Health." www.eatright.org.

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U.S. Department of Agriculture. "What's Cooking? USDA Cooking Bowl, Household Recipes." www.whatscooking.fns.usda.gov.

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