

The joy of eating together with a child under school age



The eating skills of a 1–6-year-old develop through family meals

- From the age of 1, the child will begin to eat the same food as the rest of the family. The food can be chopped down if necessary.
- Family meals around the table are important moments for a child to get to know different foods and learn new tastes and eating skills.
- The child learns by watching others at the dinner table and mimics adults on how to eat a variety of foods and meals. The example of others encourages them to take a taste.
- A positive and supportive mealtime environment engenders a balanced relationship with eating.
- During a meal, the focus is on eating and being together. Toys and other entertainment, such as digital devices, are not part of meals.
- Drinking from cups and glasses is recommended. A straw mug can be used alongside. A feeding bottle is not recommended for children over one year of age.
- The independent use of cutlery (glass, spoon, fork, knife) in an age-appropriate manner also develops the child's fine motor skills.

Learning new tastes

- A child under school age learns to taste different foods and practises eating. When practising, a mess may well result. However, the child should be allowed to eat on their own.
- Children are often wary of new foods. Tell your child about the food and name the dishes.
- Encourage and exhort your child and give them time to get to know the new food. Don't push them or bribe them with e.g. treats, as these means are not conducive to discovering new tastes.
- Offer new foods repeatedly and in small portions, even if the child doesn't want to taste them at first.
- Getting to know a new food can begin by looking, smelling, exploring, and feeling it.
- The regularity and number of repetitions (10–15 tastings) will help your child get used to the new tastes.
- Children usually like clearly defined meals, for example, you can keep the salad ingredients separate and let the child put together a salad of their own choice.

A regular cadence of meals is an everyday saviour

- Regular mealtimes create security and give a sense of order to the day.
- A regular daily schedule supports the child's natural regulation of eating, keeps blood sugar levels steady, and prevents irritability and tantrums.
- Daily meals about 2–4 hours apart: breakfast, lunch, midday snack, dinner, and evening snack.



The food portions in the illustrations are suitable for a child aged around 3–5 years. With a younger child, the quantities of food are smaller, but the same principles can be used to set the cadence and composition of meals.

Building a varied meal

The plate model is a great aid in preparing meals and snacks for the whole family. The portion for a child is only slightly smaller than that for an adult. You can apply this principle to all meals and snacks over the day.

With main meals, serve:

- $\frac{1}{2}$ plate of salad, grated or cooked vegetables
- $\frac{1}{4}$ plate of potatoes, pasta, barley, rice, or other cereal grains
- $\frac{1}{4}$ plate of fish, pulses, vegetable protein preparations, eggs, or meat.

For snacks, apply the 1+1+1 formula and serve:

- Something from a plant, fruit, or berry
- Something whole-grain, such as porridge, bread, or muesli
- Something high in protein, such as dairy or soy products, hummus, eggs, or nuts.



Getting the choices right

Prefer whole-grain cereal products.

They provide your child with plenty of fibre, vitamins, and minerals. A high-fibre product contains at least 6 g of fibre per 100 g.

An adequate daily amount of **soft fats** for a child under school age is 1.5–2 tablespoons of vegetable oil or 4–6 teaspoons of vegetable fat spread or margarine.

Prefer a vegetable spread with a minimum fat content of 60 % for sandwiches and use vegetable oils or bottled margarine in cooking.

Provide nuts, almonds, and seeds in amounts around 1–2 tbsp/day (15 g), oil-based salad dressings or oil in porridge, salads and vegetables, as well as oily fish 2 times a week.

Choose fat-free milk or buttermilk, as well as low-fat (fat content $\leq 1\%$) and sugar free or low-sugar ($\leq 10\%$) yoghurts, viili, quark, or pudding.

Cheeses should have a maximum fat content of 17%.

Good sources of calcium include dairy products and calcium-fortified plant-based products.

Other sources include fish, tofu, pulses, and cabbage.

A child aged 1–3 years can receive enough calcium with a daily consumption of 3.5 dl of liquid dairy products or calcium-fortified plant-based substitutes.

A child aged 4–6 years can receive enough calcium with a daily consumption of 3.5–5 dl of liquid dairy products or calcium-fortified plant-based substitutes.

The calcium from cheese can be estimated as 1–2 slices of cheese equalling 1 dl of a liquid milk preparation or a fortified plant-based substitute. Because of the hard fats and salt content of cheese, give preference to the other sources of calcium mentioned above.



Remember vitamin D supplement:

- 10 µg/day for 1–2-year-olds and
- 7.5 µg/day for 2–17-year-olds

Fish, pulses, vegetable protein products, and skinless poultry are recommended sources of protein. Red meat and meat products should be eaten in moderation.

The recommended maximum salt intake is easy to exceed. It is advisable to season food in other ways and to pay attention to the amount of salt added to food. Stock cubes, ketchup and many seasonings and sauces have a high salt content.

In choosing a product labelled with the Heart Symbol you know it is the better choice in its category.



The recommended maximum daily amount of added sugar

- 2 years old: 2 tablespoons
 - 5 years old: 2.5 tablespoons
- can easily be exceeded through hidden sugar from, for example, two decilitres of flavoured yoghurt or a big glass of juice. **The natural sugar in fruit and berries is not considered added sugar, so it is a good idea to eat a wide variety of fruits and berries.**

Water is the recommended drink for thirst.



Include a portion of at least one vegetable, fruit, or berry at every meal or snack. The recommended amount for a child is about half the amount recommended for adults, at least 500–800 g per day. This means about five portions the size of a child's own hand a day. The portion size increases as the child grows.

A child often likes naturally sweet fruits and berries, but the bitter taste of vegetables may seem less appealing. However, it is important to get your child used to the taste of vegetables from an early age and about half of the total amount of vegetables, fruit, and berries should specifically consist of vegetables.

Tips for increasing vegetable intake:

Make vegetables a natural part of every meal. Add vegetables to sandwiches, smoothies, and main dishes in a variety of ways.

Gradually add new vegetables to familiar foods.

Involve your child in cooking and give them the opportunity to learn about vegetables.

Serve the fresh vegetables in large, easily grasped pieces. The chance to dip guarantees success!

Food is fun to play with!
Make happy sandwiches or vegetable art together.



Building a good relationship with food with your child

Children have a natural ability to regulate their eating, so they should not be forced to eat. Steady growth is an important indicator that your child is getting enough food. It is normal for a child's appetite to vary from day to day, and so the amount of food eaten can also vary. However, if there is a long-term loss of appetite, you should contact the child health clinic.

Sometimes a poor appetite can be caused by a child drinking juice or milk between meals or snacking. In this case, it is necessary to clear up the family mealtimes. Between-meal drinks (other than water) and snacks (such as raisins and corn snacks) are also not good for one's oral health.

It is important to not use food to reward or comfort. Nor should foods be classified as good and bad, or unhealthy and healthy. Instead, the importance of diversity and balance should be stressed. A child should be taught that different foods have their place in the diet. You can have treats together, but it is up to the parent to limit the amount and frequency of sweet treats in particular. It is also a good idea to think of other ways to celebrate and relax together as a family, other than just indulging in treats.

Teach your child that all kinds of bodies are valuable and unique. Avoid commenting on the child's, or anyone else's, body or weight in front of the child.

The adult decides what is to be eaten and when, but the child decides how much they will eat. This will help your child build confidence in their body and eating habits.



Read more in the Eating section of the Finnish Heart Association's Neuvokas perhe website.



<https://neuvokas.perhe.fi/en/eating>

Foods to watch out for in children under school age

It is recommended to consume fish 2–3 times a week, alternating between species.

- There are no restrictions on the amount of freshwater roach or farmed fish that may be consumed.
- Fish, including wild salmon, trout, lamprey, or large specimens of Baltic herring (more than 19 cm in length before being gutted), caught in the Baltic Sea can be consumed once every two months.
- Pikeperch, bream, whitefish, perch, or pike caught in fresh water can be served once a week, and freshwater vendace twice a month.

Sausages, wieners, cold cuts

- 1–2 years: up to 1 sausage meal and up to 3–4 slices of cold cuts per week.
- Over 2 years: The total amount of sausages, sausages and cold cuts may not exceed 150 g per week, which means, for example 1 sausage meal per week and 1 slice of cold cuts per day; or 2 sausage meals per week, no cold cuts; or 2 slices of cold cuts per day.

Liver, liver dishes

- 1–6-year-olds: You can eat up to 70 g of liver sausage and liver pâté per week and, additionally, up to 300 g (3/4 of a box) of liver casserole per month. If the above are consumed, liver sauce and liver patties should be avoided.

- **Caffeine** for children and young people (1–18 years) less than 3 mg / kg body weight / day. Cola drinks typically contain 12 mg of caffeine per 1 dl. Coffee and energy drinks are not recommended at all for children under 15 years of age.
- **Juice drinks** with benzoic acid (E210–E213) as an additive are not recommended for daily consumption.
- **Fresh porridge with seeds or raw cereals** should be soaked at refrigerator temperature when consumed by children aged 1–6 years.
- **Raw and unpasteurised milk, as well as cheese made from it**, are recommended only after heating.
- **Meat and poultry** are to be cooked until fully done. The same cutlery should not be used for raw and cooked products.
- **Non-Finnish frozen berries** are to be carefully heated before use.
- **Beetroot** must be cooked throughout, not used raw.
- **Sprouts** only after heating.
- **Rice drinks** are not recommended for exclusive use for children under 6 years of age.
- **Brazil nuts** are not recommended for young children at all.
4–10-year-olds: max 1 nut/day.
- **Oilseeds** (e.g. sunflower, pumpkin, and chia seeds) up to 1 tbsp/day.
- **Cinnamon** (cassia cinnamon) or products containing it are not recommended for daily use.
- **Seaweed preparations** are not recommended.

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