

## Nutrition guidelines for children under the age of five

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While low-fat diets are recommended for older children and adults, under-fives need diets that contain good amounts of fat. This fat should come from foods that contain plenty of other nutrients like meat, oily fish and full-fat milk (semi-skimmed milk is unsuitable for children under the age of two, and skimmed unsuitable for under-fives), rather than from high-fat foods that contain few vitamins and minerals like cakes, biscuits and chocolate.

Meanwhile, young children shouldn't eat too many fibre-rich foods, either, as these may fill them up so much they can't eat enough to provide them with adequate calories and nutrients. However, as kids approach school age, they should gradually move towards a diet that's lower in fat and higher in fibre. And by the age of five, their diet should be low in fat, sugar and salt and high in fibre with five fruit and veg a day – just like adults.

Fortunately, whatever their age, children can easily get a balanced diet – and lower their risk of becoming overweight or obese – by eating a variety of foods from four main food groups:

- Bread, other cereals and potatoes – these starchy foods, which also include pasta and rice, provide energy, fibre, vitamins and minerals
- Fruit and vegetables – these provide fibre, vitamins and minerals and are a source of antioxidants.
- Milk and dairy foods – these provide calcium for healthy bones and teeth, protein for growth, plus vitamins and minerals.
- Meat, fish and alternatives – these foods, which include eggs and pulses, provide protein and vitamins and minerals, especially iron. Pulses also contain fibre.

In contrast, foods from a fifth food group that includes fatty and sugary foods like biscuits, cakes, fizzy drinks, chocolate, sweets, crisps and pastries, that add little nutritional value, should be limited.

### Children's Vitamin and Mineral Intake

Choosing foods from each of the four main food groups will help to ensure that kids receive all the vitamins and minerals they need for good nutrition and health.

Worryingly, figures from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey of Young People reveals that many children have inadequate intakes of many nutrients, including vitamin A, riboflavin (vitamin B2), zinc, potassium, magnesium, calcium and iron, particularly once they reach the teenage years and have more control over what they eat.

In contrast, the survey showed these poor intakes of vitamins and minerals were combined with too much salt, sugar and saturated fat. It's particularly important that children and teenagers eat a diet that's packed with vitamins and minerals. In fact, older children often have higher requirements for nutrients than even adults in order to support growth – for example, 15 to 18 year old boys need more thiamin (vitamin B1), niacin (vitamin B3), vitamin B6, calcium, phosphorus and iron than adult men! Similarly, 15 to 18 year old girls need more niacin, calcium, phosphorus and magnesium than adult women.

### Calorie Intake for Children

Although obesity is a major problem, children and teenagers still need enough calories to grow and develop into healthy adults. This chart gives a rough guideline to the daily calorie needs of boys and girls at different ages. Kids who are really active may need more; those who are inactive may need less.

Age	Calories per day	
	Boys	Girls
1–3	1,230	1,165
4–6	1,715	1,545
7–10	1,970	1,740
11–14	2,220	1,845
15–18	2,755	2,110
Adults	2,550	1,940

### Salt Intake for Children

It's important to ensure that children don't have too much salt. While adults should have no more than 6g of salt a day, children need even less as they have smaller bodies.

So don't add salt to cooking or meals and check information on labels when you buy processed foods such as crisps, ready meals and sauces even if they're aimed at children. Opt for those with the least sodium – it's the sodium in salt that's linked to health problems like high blood pressure. Bacon, ham, sausages and cheese are also high in salt so limit these, too.

The maximum amounts of salt children should have at different ages are

- 1–3 years – 2g a day (0.8g sodium)

- 4–6 years – 3g a day (1.2g sodium)
- 7–10 years – 5g a day (2g sodium)
- 11 years upward – 6g a day (2.5g sodium)

The British Nutrition Foundation has detailed nutrition guidelines for children at different ages

## References

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