

Raising Healthy Children: The Role of Snacking¹

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Every kid loves a good snack, but parents may think that snacking is bad and can lead to weight gain. Although this might be the case when snacking on cookies, chips, and candy all day, *healthy* snacking is an important part of a child's daily intake. Childhood is a time of rapid growth, and meeting the nutritional needs associated with normal development is critical to a child's well-being (World Health Organization, 2009). Because children have much smaller stomachs than adults, healthy snacking can provide nutrients between meals to help them meet their daily nutritional needs. The key is learning how to make healthy snack choices and to avoid consuming too many snacks high in added sugars and low in healthy nutrients. This publication teaches parents the importance of snacking for children and how to provide healthier options.

How Healthy Snacks Benefit Children

Healthy snack choices can provide children with some of the vitamins, minerals, proteins, and calories they need for growth, energy, and overall good health. In fact, healthy snacks can satisfy nutrient gaps and provide up to one quarter of a child's daily energy needs (USDA, "Daily Food Plan," n.d.). Healthy snacking satisfies hunger between meals, improves concentration, and prevents overeating at mealtime.



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Snacking Strategies

One of the keys to promoting successful and healthy snacking in children is to be prepared. Following these tips will help you provide appropriate snacks to your child at the appropriate times and places (USDA, "Daily Food Plan," n.d.):

- Snacks should not replace a meal, so avoid serving large snacks. Small portions are especially important for those occasional snacks that contain lots of added sugars and are low in nutrients.
- Serve regular meals and snacks every three to four hours. Allowing adequate time between meals and snacks will ensure that children are not too full to eat their meals. Structured meals and snacks also will keep kids from

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eating out of boredom. Although schedules are helpful, always listen to your child to allow him to recognize when he is hungry or full.

- Avoid using food as a reward or a way to calm an upset child. Also avoid using treats such as cookies or candy to make up for a meal not eaten.
- Be prepared by having healthy snacks on hand to make it easier for your child to make smart snack choices. Buying snacks from a vending machine or grabbing a bag of chips or cookies is usually an unhealthy temptation for families on the go.
- Not all snacks are appropriate for everyone. Always keep in mind food allergies and potential choking hazards when planning snacks.

Making Healthy Snack Choices

Use the Nutrition Facts labels when buying foods for snacks. Look for foods low in calories, saturated and trans-fats, and sugar, and purchase those high in nutrients such as dietary fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2013).

Choose “food group foods” first to meet the recommended intake for different nutrients, and think about ways to combine foods from different food groups. To meet more nutritional needs, make snacks that incorporate at least two food groups. For example, pair apple slices with cheese, or whole-grain crackers with peanut butter. Incorporate foods from all the food groups into the snacks you serve over the course of a week.



Figure 2. Credits: iStockphoto

Healthy Grains

Grain products are available as whole or refined grains. Whole-grain products are high in fiber, vitamins, and minerals, and these are important for good digestive health (Mayo Clinic, 2011). Adequate intake of whole grains can also reduce the risk for certain diseases. It is recommended that at least half of the grains served come from whole grains. Snack time is the perfect time to serve your child whole grains. Ways to incorporate whole grains into your child’s diet are listed below:

- Use whole-wheat bread, pasta, or brown rice instead of white bread, pasta, or rice.
- Serve whole-grain baked tortilla chips, crackers, low-fat granola, or cereal bars.
- Popcorn can be a good snack if little or no salt or butter is added. For added flavor, you can try non-salt spices such as garlic or parmesan cheese.
- Use whole grain cereals, such as whole-wheat cereal flakes, toasted oats cereals, raisin bran, or oatmeal. Watch out for added sugars!

Fruits and Vegetables

Keep fruits and vegetables readily available and offer them often. Buy them pre-cut or cut them yourself and place in a container in your refrigerator where your child can see them. Buy fruits that are in season. These are usually less expensive and better quality. Get your children involved by having them help you shop for fruits and vegetables and clean and cut them into fun size pieces or shapes. Starting a small garden is another way to get kids involved and interested in eating vegetables and fruits. Try some of the ideas below.

- Serve fruits, such as apple slices and grapes, or vegetables, such as celery sticks, cucumbers, and baby carrots with low-fat dip, peanut butter, hummus, or yogurt.
- Buy fruits that are fresh, dried, frozen, or canned (in water or 100% fruit juice). Avoid fruit that has added sugars. Canned and dried fruits can be transported easily and have a long shelf life. Examples of commonly eaten dried fruits are raisins, prunes, and cranberries. Pineapple, apples, and bananas also can be purchased in the dry form. Be sure to avoid dried fruit with added sugar.
- Make a fruit salad with your child’s favorite fruits. Some suggestions are strawberries, apples, bananas, oranges, and grapes. Dip fruit in a low-fat yogurt-based dip!
- Buy or make frozen juice bars as a low-calorie snack. Make sure they are made with 100% juice. This will keep added sugar intake down.

- Make a fruit smoothie that contains fat-free or low-fat milk or yogurt and various fresh or frozen fruits such as bananas, strawberries, and pineapple. Add different fruits such as mango and papaya. Your child might surprise you and love the new flavors!
- Purchase frozen vegetables that can be easily cooked and served. Steam them in the microwave and add low-fat cheese, low-sodium seasoning, or light butter.
- Serve crunchy, raw, or steamed vegetables with low-fat dressing or topped with low-fat cheese.

Milk Products

Snack foods in this group can be a great source of calcium and can help build strong bones in growing children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Make snack choices from this food group low-fat or fat-free. Cheese can be high in fat so keep portion sizes small or serve reduced or low-fat cheeses.

- Serve fat-free or low-fat yogurt as a snack. Add various fruits, whole-grain cereal and/or low-fat granola as a topping.
- Dip fruits and vegetables into a yogurt-based dip.
- Make fruit-yogurt smoothies in a blender.
- Use fat-free milk to make a fat-free pudding.
- Use low-fat/reduced-fat cheese as a topping for vegetables.
- Serve low-fat string cheese for a quick snack.
- Serve low- or reduced-fat cheeses with fruit, whole-grain crackers, or reduced-sodium, low-fat meats.



Figure 3. Credits: iStockphoto

- Consuming low-fat milk as a beverage instead of soda can add nutrients that your child may not be getting at mealtime.

Meat and Meat Substitutes

What foods make up this food group? Meat, poultry, seafood, beans and peas, eggs, soy products, nuts, and seeds. They all contain protein, which is important for growth and maintenance of the body. Select meat and poultry that are low in fat. Eat fish rich in omega-3 fatty acids, such as salmon, and eat beans, peas, or nuts to add variety to your protein choices (USDA, “What Foods are in the Protein Foods Group?” n.d.). Follow these tips to create healthy snacks:

- Dip veggies into hummus made from chickpeas, or try a low-fat bean dip!
- Snack on nuts such as almonds, peanuts, and walnuts.
- Go lean—choose low-fat, reduced-sodium turkey, ham, or roast beef.

Additional Ideas

- Snack on leftover lunch or dinner food items, such as a sandwich, soup, or salad. Remember to make portions small.
- Try a small portion of trail mix with unsalted nuts (almonds, peanuts, and cashews), dried fruit, and healthy grains (whole-grain cereal, low-fat granola).
- Make mini pizzas using spaghetti sauce, English muffins, and low-fat mozzarella.
- Smear celery sticks with reduced-fat peanut butter or cream cheese.
- ChooseMyPlate.gov has examples of meal and snack patterns that can be customized for your child. Visit <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/preschoolers/meal-and-snack-patterns-ideas.html> for ideas.



Figure 4. Credits: iStockphoto

Occasional Snacks

It is okay to snack on cookies, chips, and candy on occasion. Remember to limit the amount and frequency these foods are consumed! Here are a few ideas for balanced choices:

- Low-fat cookies and milk (1% or fat-free)
- Baked chips in various flavors
- Whole-grain chips with salsa or guacamole

Learn More

If you are concerned with your child's diet or would like more information about snacking or nutrition in general, contact one of the following reliable sources in your county:

- UF/IFAS Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Educator (look in the blue pages of your telephone book). UF/IFAS Extension offices are listed online at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map>.
- WIC nutritionist at your county health department (also in the blue pages of your telephone book).
- For referral to a registered dietitian (RD) in your area you can call the Florida Dietetic Association at (850) 386-8850, or check the yellow pages of your phone book

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