

Preschoolers and Nutrition - 5 Things Every Parent Needs to Know



There's no doubt that today's is a fast paced world, and there are dozens upon dozens of choices when it comes to what you can give your kids to eat. It's tempting to buy "convenience" foods, especially when your preschooler makes a fuss, but it's important to resist the urge to give in to temptation. The nutritional needs of preschoolers are quite different than those of adolescents and adults. Here's what you can do to make sure your preschooler stays healthy and grows strong.

1. Make sure your preschooler gets an adequate amount of meat or comparable complete-protein vegetable combination. During the preschool years, kids grow at an amazing rate (the birth length doubles by age 4, for example). As preschoolers grow, their bodies need more protein than at other times in their life in order to build muscle and carry out basic bodily functions. Because of this, the protein needs of a preschooler can be up to three times the RDA!
2. Provide a wide variety of nutrient/energy-rich foods and let them ask for seconds. Believe it or not, preschoolers have an energy requirement that is roughly equivalent to the energy needs of sedentary adults. Preschoolers can't eat as much as adults can because their stomachs and other organs of the digestive system are still growing, so they need to eat more foods that are nutrient/energy rich. (Nutrient/energy-rich foods are foods that provide a high amount of nutrients for the number of calories they contain.) Good nutrient/energy-rich foods are nuts, dried fruits, and cheese. Keep portion sizes small and encourage your preschooler to ask for more if they are still hungry (yes, they will tell you).
3. Limit saturated fats. Saturated fats (the so-called "bad" fats) have a molecular structure that is different from polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. Saturated fats are harder for the body to break down, so a preschooler who consumes too much saturated fat runs the risk of becoming obese and suffering other health problems. This doesn't mean that you can't treat your preschooler to a few french fries now and then. It just means that the french fry treat should remain just that-a treat.
4. Pass them the greens. Preschoolers frequently suffer from low calcium and iron intakes-again, this is because their bodies simply are growing at such phenomenal rates. Calcium builds bones and contributes to other bodily functions, and iron is important for blood cell construction. Both calcium and iron are found in foods such as green leafy vegetables or dried beans. This is especially important to remember with calcium, because some youngsters have real trouble digesting dairy products and need another source of that mineral. If your preschooler is chronically tired or complains of dizziness, your child may be iron deficient.
5. Cut it up and let them munch. Preschoolers do need to have structured meals set out for them, but because the nutrient/energy requirement of preschoolers is so high, many preschoolers may need a small snack between regular meals in order not to become faint. In addition, preschoolers are far more receptive to new foods if they can pick them up with their fingers, so if you're on the go, cut up bite-sized portions and put them in a baggie or a sealed plastic container for when your preschooler needs it.

Of course, eating right is only half the equation for your preschooler-it's important that your preschooler engages in physical activity as well. Limit the amount of TV they watch and encourage your preschooler to partake in monitored activities that get them working their muscles and cardiovascular system. Not only will your preschooler be healthy and strong, but they'll also be more likely to continue the healthy habits later on!