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Children's snacks: Food for thought

Snacking is a major pastime for many American children — so much so that nearly one-fourth of kids' daily energy intake comes from nibbling between meals. If snack time threatens to become more frequent than mealtime, healthy snack choices are all the more important.

You play a major role in helping your children distinguish between healthy and unhealthy snacks. Here are a few tips for evaluating appropriate snacks and portion sizes and getting kids interested in nutritious snack foods at different ages.

- **Toddlers and preschoolers (ages 1 to 6).** For this age group, think small. Offer about a 1-tablespoon serving for each year of age — say, 4 tablespoons of yogurt for a 4-year-old. As children get older, they can eat bigger portions. Avoid large servings that decrease your child's appetite for the next meal.

Certain foods may cause choking in younger children. Avoid feeding raw vegetables, popcorn, nuts or peanuts, and dried fruits — such as raisins — to children under 3. Slice hot dogs lengthwise and into small pieces and cut grapes in half.

- **School age (ages 7 to 12).** During this period, children begin choosing their own snacks. Your child may even take charge of preparing his or her after-school snack.

Kids this age often clamor for the latest fad snack food, which may well be heavily advertised as a healthy choice even moms can endorse. Despite advertising claims, these products may not be the healthiest snack choices — for example, granola bars (often

high-calorie and not exactly low-fat), Fruit Roll-Ups and Fruit Snacks (which stick in the teeth just like candy), packaged cold cuts, and cheese and crackers. Stay involved in choosing and preparing healthy snacks for your children as they grow. And try not to let your child fall victim to the latest snack gimmick.

- **Teenagers.** As children strive for independence in their teens, their food intake becomes less supervised. This age group tends to eat more snacks and fewer regular meals. Try not to let your child eat a diet jam-packed with snacks and convenience foods. These types of foods are less likely to be healthy and are more likely to be high in calories and fat.

Healthy snacking habits are learned early in childhood and have lifelong lasting effects. However, it's never too late to try to break your child's junk-food habits.

Stock up on smart snacks

What are the best snacks to keep on hand for hungry kids? You want to choose nutritious snack foods — those that are high in fiber and low in fat — but convenience is an important factor, too. And don't forget to honor your child's preferences (if that is possible).

Your child will be more likely to eat a healthy snack if it's tasty and easy to make. And, keep in mind that kids' appetites and eating habits naturally vary; what your child likes may not appeal to another child. The most important thing is to choose a nutritious snack that you and your child can agree on. Here are some quick, healthy and nutrient-rich snacks that you and your child may want to chew over.

- Low-fat or fat-free milk, cheese and yogurt (regular or frozen).
- Fat-free pudding snacks.
- Fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Fruit canned in juice or water.
- Frozen juice bars.
- Sandwiches made with whole-grain bread, lean meat and reduced-fat or fat-free mayonnaise.

- Chips (baked, not fried).
- Bagels (preferably whole-grain).
- Pretzels.
- Dry whole-grain cereals (Cheerios, Honey Nut Shredded Wheat, Quaker Squares).

As a general guideline, it's OK for kids to eat a healthy snack every three to four hours. Children should snack only if they're hungry, though — not because they're feeling bored or craving a certain food. Discourage snacking right before mealtimes.

What about juice?

Children often prefer fruit juice to water or fresh fruit because juice tastes better to them. And many parents see no problem with allowing their children to drink almost unlimited amounts juice, since juice is promoted as a good source of nutrition. Although juice does contain some healthy nutrients, it's high in calories (more than sugary carbonated drinks!) and it may contribute to weight gain if consumed in excess. It also lacks the healthy fiber that whole fruit has. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children drink no more than two 6-ounce servings of fruit juice a day. Consider juices fortified with calcium, especially if your child shies away from milk and dairy products.

Nutrition labels: Reading between the lines

You've probably seen a lot of food products labeled *low-fat*, *reduced-fat*, *reduced-calorie*, *light*, *sugar-free* or *fat-free*. Be careful when evaluating these nutrition claims, and check the nutrition label to find out the whole story. Sometimes what appears to be healthy really isn't. For example, foods marketed as low-fat or fat-free can still be high in calories, and most snack foods are naturally "cholesterol-free," but they can still be very high in fat, saturated fat and sugar.

Look for snack items that are truly low in fat, sugar and sodium. As a rule of thumb, try to buy snack items that have percent daily values close to 5 percent for fat, sugar or sodium. Anything with a daily

value of 20 percent or more of these is considered high in that component. Foods that have at least 2 grams of dietary fiber per serving and are also low in fat, sugar and sodium are excellent choices, but finding them will not be an easy task.

Snack-time tips

It's not always easy to persuade your children to eat healthy snacks. Try experimenting with the following techniques to promote snack-time health:

- **Offer similar choices.** For example, don't say: "Do you want ice cream or do you want pretzels?" Instead, offer comparable choices, such as regular or frozen yogurt, celery or carrots, graham crackers or soda crackers, apples or oranges.
- **Offer variety.** Select snacks from several areas of the Food Guide Pyramid. If you serve the same snacks repeatedly, your children might get bored and ask for unhealthy snacks instead.
- **Be creative.** Dress up fruits and vegetables for maximum appeal. Prepare celery with peanut butter, for example, or carrots with low-fat dip. Offer crackers with several varieties of cheeses. Cut vegetables in different ways to make them visually interesting.
- **Don't give up if your child is a picky eater.** Although you can't force your child to eat new foods, try offering them in small portions and in combination with familiar snacks. Repeated exposure to a food can often lead to a child liking that food. Don't feel like you have to give in to your children's every whim. If they refuse to eat a snack you have prepared, they can always wait for the next meal. Don't punish children for refusing to eat certain foods.
- **Observe what other kids are eating.** Ask your children what their friends and classmates eat for snacks. And when other children visit your home, observe what they like to eat. If your children's peers are choosing healthy snacks, you can start serving those snacks also. As you pack bag lunches for your children to take to child care or school, avoid snacks that elicit a collective "Yuck!" around the lunch table.

- **Avoid snacking before mealtimes.** Children who attend child care may not be hungry at the family mealtime if they have a late afternoon snack at child care. Consider asking your child-care provider to not offer a snack too late. In extreme cases, you may even pack an evening meal for your child to eat at 4:30 p.m., before leaving child care. Then your child can have a healthy snack at home during the family dinnertime.

Your child's snacking habits aren't going to change overnight, but look for positive changes over weeks and months. Teaching your children to make healthy snack choices today will reap your whole family a lifetime of benefits.

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