

When Your Toddler Doesn't Want to Eat

How much should my child eat?

Your child's growth will slow down after he or she is about two years old. The number of calories your child needs will decrease at about this time, and so will how much he or she wants to eat. How much your child eats may be very different from how much another child eats. Don't worry if it seems that your child doesn't eat enough at one meal. Children often make up for a small meal or a missed meal at the next mealtime.

You'll know your child is eating enough if he or she is growing at the right rate. Talk to your doctor if you have any concerns about how your child is growing.

What if my child is a picky eater?

As long as your child is choosing nutritious foods, you can let him or her choose what to eat. Sometimes your child may want to eat a particular food again and again for a while, and then not want to eat it at all. Try to let your child explore new foods on his or her own. It won't help to insist that your child taste new foods.

You may need to prepare special servings of some foods to make sure your child gets a balanced diet. For example, if you're making beef stew for dinner, and your child will only eat potatoes and carrots, you may need to cook some of these vegetables separate from the stew so that your child will eat them.

You may want to make a list of foods that your child will eat so you can make sure he or she eats a balanced diet. Many books and computer software programs are available in bookstores and libraries to help you figure out if your child is eating well.

How can I get my child to eat?

Offer your child food that is tasty and looks good, and offer the right amount. A good rule of thumb is to offer one tablespoon of each kind of food for each year of your child's age. If your child is still hungry, you can serve more. Don't force your child to clean his or her plate. Once he or she is no longer hungry, your child should be allowed to stop eating.

Try not to bribe or force your child to eat. Threats or punishments aren't good ideas either. If your child doesn't want to eat, accept his or her refusal. Even though you may be concerned, don't show your child that

you are upset by this refusal to eat. If your child is seeking attention, your disapproval fills that need, and he or she may try to gain your attention in the same way another time.

What about snacks?

Try to balance your child's request for a snack with the family's need to enjoy a regular meal together. If the meal is several hours away, you can offer a bigger snack. If the meal is in the next hour, you may want to offer a small snack. If you give your child only a small snack, explain to your child that the family will be eating soon.

If your child doesn't eat at one mealtime, you can offer a nutritious snack, such as fresh fruit, vegetables or whole-grain crackers, a few hours later. If your child doesn't eat the snack, offer food again at the next mealtime. A child will usually eat at the second meal. With this approach, you can be sure that your child won't starve or have other problems that come from a poor diet.

How can I make mealtimes easier?

You may want to try the following suggestions to make mealtimes easier and more enjoyable:

- Tell your child that it will be time to eat soon 10 to 15 minutes before mealtime. Children may be so tired or excited from play activities that they don't feel like eating. Giving your child a warning before the meal will allow him or her a chance to settle down before eating.
- If possible, set regular mealtimes.
- Don't let your child play with toys during mealtimes. Reading books or watching television shouldn't be allowed either during mealtimes.

If mealtimes are pleasant, your child may begin to look forward to eating with other family members. Try to avoid arguments during mealtime. Explain to your child how good it is to eat together and ask that he or she stays at the table until everyone has eaten. It may be helpful if family members always use the same seats at the table. Be sure you don't expect manners that are too difficult for your child. For example, don't expect a child who is three years old to eat with the proper utensil. For many children, a spoon is much easier to handle than a fork.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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