

Choosing Healthy Snacks

Many children arrive home from school and head straight to the refrigerator for a snack. There is nothing wrong with moderate snacking, since youngsters have high levels of activity and may need more calories than three meals a day provide to meet their energy needs. For many children - particularly those who are quite physically active - snacks can help round out their nutritional requirements and provide as much as one fourth of their calories. In general, occasional snacks will not ruin their appetites for regular meals, as long as the snack is not eaten shortly before they sit down to lunch or dinner. Snacks are another opportunity for parents to provide healthy food choices to their children while reinforcing good eating habits - learning to get hungry, rather than eating to feel full all the time.

When snacking, children often reach for the closest food at hand. If your cupboard has cookies in it, that is probably what your child will eat. However, if there are healthier items in the refrigerator or on the kitchen table, your youngster will become accustomed to snacking on these foods. The healthiest and simplest choices are fruits and raw vegetables, which require little if any preparation. Encourage your child to make healthy snacks a habit by keeping fruit and cut vegetables (carrots, cucumbers, celery, peppers, broccoli) handy.

Children in the older range of the middle years also can learn some simple cooking techniques. As they prepare snacks for themselves, you can teach them to differentiate between healthy and less healthy choices. However, be sure they learn appropriate safety precautions for the use of a stove, oven, microwave or other cooking appliance.

Healthy Snacks for Any Mood

Your child's snacking moods may vary, but he can still consistently maintain healthy snacking habits. For instance, if his snacking mood is:

Thirsty! Cold skim or low-fat milk, mineral water with lime, chilled vegetable juice, 100% fruit juice (apple, grape, grapefruit, orange, pineapple, raspberry), sugar-free Koolaid.

Smooth! Yogurt, banana, papaya, mango, custard, cottage cheese, "fruit smoothie."

Crunchy! Raw vegetables (asparagus, bell pepper, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, zucchini), apples, corn on the cob, unbuttered popcorn, puffed-rice cakes, and wheat crackers.

Juicy! Fresh fruit (berries, cantaloupe, grapes, grapefruit, kiwi, nectarine, orange, peach, plum, watermelon, frozen juice pops, tomato, pear).

Really hungry! Hard-boiled eggs, granola, sandwich, cereal with milk, bran muffin, peanut butter (on crackers or bread), nuts, cheese.

How to Reduce Dietary Fat and Cholesterol

Family eating habits determine what your child will learn to eat and enjoy. Here are some ways you and your family can limit fat and cholesterol in your diets:

- Keep fresh fruits and vegetables available.
- Serve whole-grain bread and cereals.
- Rely on low-fat milk and low-fat yogurt. Select cheeses that are lower in fat.
- Include starchy foods (potatoes, pasta, rice) in your meals.
- Avoid high-fat and high-calorie toppings, including butter, margarine, sour cream, and gravy. Instead, use herbed cottage cheese, grated parmesan cheese, or low-fat yogurt as toppings.
- Serve lean meats, such as chicken, turkey, fish, lean beef cuts (lean hamburger, top loin, top round, eye of round) and lean pork cuts (tenderloin, loin, chops, ham). Cut away visible fat and remove the skin from poultry.
- Select margarine and vegetable oils (canola, corn, olive, sunflower and soybean oils).
- Choose frozen fruit bars, angel food cake, or low-fat frozen yogurt instead of rich, creamy desserts.
- When cooking, use nonstick vegetable sprays to cut down on added fat.
- Choose fat-free cooking techniques, such as baking, broiling, poaching, grilling, or steaming when preparing meat, fish and poultry. Do not use butter or margarine when preparing or serving vegetables.

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