



## Nutrition for Young Children

Busy lifestyles sometimes mean not having time to prepare or provide a variety of foods so we resort to 'grab and go food'; sometimes we like to please children by offering them their favourite snacks or we just can't face a battle and want them to eat 'something'. What we don't always realise is the impact of children not getting the right amounts of vitamins and minerals they need. There has been a rise in the numbers of children who are not receiving the nutrition they need to grow and develop to their potential. This problem is not their fault and they can't fix it - but parents can.

The following information has been taken from 'Grub 4 Life' and helps us to understand how food affects children's growth and development. We don't all get it right all of the time but an easy recommendation to follow from The Department of Health is that **all children under five take a daily supplement of vitamins D, A and C**, (for example, via Healthy Start vitamin drops). For families who don't qualify for Healthy Start vitamin drops, there's a wide selection of children's vitamin supplements available.

You should choose a branded supplement that provides 7.5ug vitamin D per day.

Increasing numbers of children are not meeting the guideline requirements for some vitamins and minerals. Prolonged nutrient deficiency can have serious effects on children's health, growth and development, but most problems can be corrected if spotted early, by either changing the child's diet or supplementing it with the missing nutrients.

### *Focus on the big picture*

Nutrient deficiencies are not caused by toddlers eating poorly for a day or two, or even a week or two. Most toddlers have stores of a lot of nutrients, and poor eating for a short period won't deplete them. It's also important to remember that, just like adults, toddlers eat better some days than others. We need to think about the quality of their diets over a week rather than just judging them on one day in isolation.

### *Take time to identify the issues*

The most common toddler nutrition problems can often be spotted if you know what to look for. Asking parents some key questions about how toddlers eat at home is very helpful and, of course, your own records of how well a toddler eats in nursery are valuable too.

### *Keep an eye out for... Iron deficiency anaemia*

Toddlers with a low-iron status may be pale, lethargic and lacking energy. Anaemia in the early years has been linked with poor cognitive development. The best food sources of iron are lean red meat, breakfast cereals, eggs, dark leafy green vegetables and pulses, e.g. beans and lentils. Iron supplements may be required if a toddler is anaemic, but this should be discussed with a GP.

The most common cause for iron deficiency is a low intake of haem iron (found in meat) and a failure to eat foods rich in vitamin C, which helps the absorption of iron – this is especially important when you eat non-haem iron from vegetables or cereals. Toddlers who are given tea to drink or high-bran cereals to eat can also struggle to get enough iron: both of these foods restrict iron absorption.

***Vitamin D deficiency***

Vitamin D deficiency causes rickets, which we have seen returning to children in the UK. The only dietary sources of vitamin D are oily fish, margarines, follow-on formula and some breakfast cereals. Vitamin D is also produced in the skin via sunlight. The Department of Health recommends that all children under five take a daily supplement of vitamins D, A and C, for example, via Healthy Start vitamin drops. For families who don't qualify for Healthy Start vitamin drops, there's a wide selection of children's vitamin supplements available. They should choose a branded supplement that provides 7.5ug vitamin D per day.

***Lack of fibre***

Some toddlers don't eat enough foods that contain fibre, such as fruits and vegetables or wholegrain cereals like wholemeal bread, brown rice or wholegrain pasta. A diet low in fibre can cause constipation. Toddlers with chronic constipation may be given mild laxatives and prescribed fibre supplements such as lactulose or fybogel by their GP. However, it's important not to overload toddlers with high-fibre food, as they can become too full and go off their food. As always, it's all about balance.

If a toddler eats a low-fibre cereal at breakfast, they can have some wholegrain pasta at lunch or a sandwich made with a mix of white and wholemeal bread at teatime. Nursery cooks should keep a mixture of wholegrain cereal foods and refined (white) cereal foods, and serve a variety. Vegetables and pulses can be added to sauces, soups and gravies to increase their fibre content, and fruit should always be served as part of nursery desserts or snacks.

***Omega-3 fats***

In recent years diets have changed to contain more omega-6 fats and less omega-3 fats. This is partly because toddlers eat more omega-6-rich vegetable oils and spreads – a good thing to reduce saturated fat intake. However, to balance the increase in omega-6 fats, toddlers must increase their intake of omega-3 fats.

The best source of omega-3 fats is oily fish like salmon, mackerel, sardines, pilchards and trout. Ideally toddlers need to eat at least two servings of fish per week – one serving can be from white fish or canned tuna (canned tuna doesn't count as an oily fish); the other serving should be from oily fish. Fish is notoriously tricky to encourage toddlers to eat, but cooks can develop very popular dishes.

Choosing the right oils helps increase omega-3 fats, too. Olive oil and soya oil for dressings and rapeseed oil for cooking gives a good balance of omega-3 and -6 fats. Pure vegetable oil is usually (but not always) rapeseed oil. For toddlers who don't eat any fish, an omega-3 supplement may be necessary to balance their intake of fats.