



For The Early Learning Centre Sector

Nutrition Fact Sheet

The Importance of Early Healthy Eating Patterns

Winter 2025



The first few years of life are a critical window for growth, brain development, and the formation of lifelong habits. During this time, children are developing physically and emotionally, what they eat plays a key role in shaping these outcomes. Establishing healthy eating patterns early can shape food preferences and appetite regulation, lay the foundation for lifelong health, and reduce the risk of nutrition related diseases later in life. Therefore, this fact sheet explores the importance of establishing healthy eating habits early in life and what we can do to support their development from a young age.

Key Messages

- The first 1000 days are known as a critical window for influencing lifelong habits and health.
- The more variety a child is introduced to early on, the more likely they are to enjoy and accept a wide range of nutritious foods.
- Good nutrition in the early years helps prevent a number of long term health issues such as -
 - Childhood obesity
 - Type two diabetes
 - Heart disease
 - Tooth decay
 - Iron deficiency anaemia

Critical Window for Habit Formation

The first 1000 days (from pregnancy to around age 2), are known as a critical window for influencing lifelong habits and health.

In this stage:

- Children learn how to eat: using fingers, spoons, sitting for meals.
- Mealtimes routines and environments influence future behaviours.
- Repeated exposure builds familiarity and reduces pickiness.

During this time, it can be helpful to -

- Encourage positive mealtime routines (such as eating at the table, no screens, family style meals).
- Consistent exposure to a variety of healthy foods sets the stage for balanced eating patterns in childhood and adulthood.

Developing Taste Preferences

Infants are born with a preference for sweet flavours, but taste preferences are shaped by exposure. The more variety of child is introduced to early on, the more likely they are to enjoy and accept a wide range of nutritious foods.



- Offer a variety of vegetables, fruit, lean meat/meat alternatives and dairy/dairy alternatives.
- Repeated exposure is key - it may take 10-15 tries for a child to accept a new food.
- Limit sugary, salty or highly processed foods early - they can overpower natural flavours and create a lifelong preference for less nutritious choices.

To help with developing taste preferences -

- Let infants and toddlers explore new tastes and textures through safe, age appropriate foods.
- Be a role model - when children see adults enjoying healthy foods, they're more likely to follow suit.

Preventing Long-Term Health Issues

Good nutrition in the early years helps prevent a number of long term health issues such as childhood obesity, type two diabetes, heart disease, tooth decay and iron deficiency anaemia. Eating patterns established early can also affect metabolism, gut health and even brain development.

Healthy food can boost energy levels, attention span, and learning capacity, helping children thrive in all aspects of care and play.

Practical Tips for Healthy Eating in Childcare

- Serve meals at regular intervals.
- Offer water between meals instead of fruit juice.
- Avoid added sugar, honey (before age 1) and choking hazards such as food with tough skins, strings or bones, hard foods.

A Healthy Start

Creating a positive, supportive food environment helps children -

- Feel safe exploring new foods.
- Build confidence in self feeding.
- Develop lifelong attitudes toward eating and nutrition.

Healthy eating isn't just about what's on the plate, it's about building habits, shaping preferences, and nurturing well-being from the very beginning.

For more information, please visit:
Promoting Healthy Eating In Early Childhood Education and Care Services
https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/EC_Promoting-healthy-eating-in-early-childhood-education-and-care-services_Aug2024.pdf
Healthy Eating for Children
<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/healthy-eating-for-children>

