
Feeding Your 1- to 2-Year-Old

Toddlers this age are moving from the eating habits they had as infants toward a diet more like your own.

Your job is to keep introducing new flavors and textures. Food preferences are set early in life, so help your child develop a taste for healthy foods now.

Toddlers have little tummies, so serve foods that are packed with the nutrients they need to grow healthy and strong, and limit the sweets and empty calories.

Your toddler will continue to explore self-feeding, first with fingers and then with utensils at around 15 to 18 months of age. Give your child many opportunities to practice these skills, but lend a hand when frustrations arise. As skills develop, step back and let your little one take over.

Toddlers also like to assert their independence, and the table is one place where you should give yours some sense of control. Allow your toddler to respond to internal cues for hunger and fullness but set the boundaries.

Remember: You decide what variety of healthy foods to offer at a meal and your child decides which of those foods to eat, how much to eat, and whether to eat at all.

A Word About Milk

Milk is an important part of a toddler's diet because it provides calcium and vitamin D, which help build strong bones. Most kids under age 2 should drink whole milk for the dietary fats needed for normal growth and brain development. If a toddler is at risk for becoming overweight or there is a family history of obesity, high cholesterol, or heart problems, doctors recommend switching to reduced fat (2%) milk. Talk with your doctor before doing so.

When your child is 2, you can make the switch to low-fat or nonfat milk.

Between 12 and 18 months of age is a good time for transition to a cup. Instead of cutting out bottles all at once, you can gradually eliminate them from the feeding schedule, starting with mealtime. Offer whole milk in a cup after the child has begun the meal. If you are breastfeeding, only offer milk in a cup and avoid the bottle habit altogether.

Some kids don't like cows milk at first because it's different from the breast milk or formula they're used to. If that's the case, it's OK to mix whole milk with formula or breast milk and gradually adjust the mixture so that it eventually becomes 100% cow's milk.

Iron Intake

It's important to watch out for iron deficiency after kids reaches 1 year of age. It can affect their physical, mental, and behavioral development, and also can lead to anemia.

To help prevent iron deficiency:

- Limit your child's milk intake to 16-24 full ounces (480-720 milliliters) a day.
- Increase iron-rich foods in your child's diet, like meat, poultry, fish, beans, and iron-fortified foods.
- Continue serving iron-fortified cereal until your child is 18 to 24 months old.

Talk with your doctor if you're concerned that your child drinks a lot of cow's milk or isn't getting enough iron, or if you're thinking of giving your child a vitamin supplement.

Foods to Avoid

By now your child should be eating a variety of foods. Continue to watch for allergic reactions when introducing new foods. Be aware that a child is at higher risk of developing food allergies if the child or one or more close family members have allergies or allergy-related conditions, like food allergies, eczema, or asthma. Talk to the doctor if you have any concerns.

Avoid foods that could present choking hazards, like popcorn, hard candies, hot dogs, raw vegetables and hard fruits, whole grapes, raisins, and nuts. Supervise your child at all times when eating.

How Much Should My Child Eat?

Offer your child three meals and two or three healthy snacks a day, but keep in mind that it's common for toddlers to skip meals. Allowing kids to skip a meal is a difficult concept for many parents, but kids should be allowed to respond to their own internal cues for hunger and fullness. Don't push food on a child who's not hungry, but kids shouldn't be allowed to eat on demand all day long either.

Maintain a regular schedule of meals and snacks so your kids will come to expect that food will be available at certain times of the day. If you have any questions about how much your child should eat, speak with your doctor.

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