

Nutrition matters for the early years

Guidance for feeding under fives in
the childcare setting

Foreword



What we eat can play a critical role in determining our health, whatever our age. The eating patterns established in the first few years of life influence health during childhood and into adulthood. Work to encourage good nutrition during the early years is therefore an investment for the health of our population in years to come. This is recognised in the Food and Nutrition Strategy for Northern Ireland, which recommends that children and young people should be given priority during the planning and delivery of initiatives that aim to influence and enable dietary changes.

It is recognised that increasing numbers of children under the age of five are spending long periods of time in childcare outside their own homes. This has implications for the dietary intakes of this group as a large proportion of their meals and snacks are now eaten away from their home.

The importance of nutrition for the under fives has been recognised by many groups, evidenced by the variety of reports produced, including the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy (COMA) Report *Weaning and the Weaning Diet*; the Caroline Walker Trust document, *Eating well for under-5s in childcare*; and the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) publication, *Healthy diets for infants and young children*.

A substantial amount of work has been undertaken in recent years within the Health and Social Services (HSS) Boards and Trusts, to promote and encourage good nutritional practices in the various childcare settings, for example in relation to policy development and in the production of a range of printed resources including the *Nutrition and Dental Health Guidelines*; *Healthy Eating for Tots and Teeth*; and menu checklists. However regional guidance to ensure consistency across all areas has not previously been prepared.

The need for such guidance was identified by the regional Community Nutrition Group of the British Dietetic Association, which comprises all local community dietitians and the Regional Health Promotion Manager for Nutrition at the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland (HPA). In response to this, and in support of the objectives of the Food and Nutrition Strategy, the New Targeting Social Need Agenda and in the context of the Clinical and Social Care Governance, the HPA established and facilitated an inter-agency group to develop nutritional guidance for the under fives in childcare. The inter-agency group led by the Health Promotion Agency included health visitors, social workers from the Early Years Teams, oral health professionals, community dietitians, paediatric dietitians and childcare providers.

Nutrition matters for the early years provides practical information on a range of nutritional issues of relevance to infants and children up to the age of five. The nutritional guidance is based on current Government recommendations outlined by COMA. The document owes much to the work already undertaken within the HSS Boards and Trusts and has been developed to assist members of the Early Years Teams in the registration and inspection of day nurseries and playgroups. The information will also be valuable to the childcare providers working in these establishments to guide their practice.

Why good nutrition is important

Good nutrition is essential during childhood, as it is a time of rapid growth, development and activity. This is also a vital time for healthy tooth development and prevention of decay. General eating habits and patterns are formed in the first few years of life, so it is important that the food and eating patterns to which young children are exposed - both in and outside the home - are based on good nutrition.

When providing food for young children consideration must be given to the following points:

- Children's appetites may vary on a daily basis and indeed from one meal to the next.
- Young children are very active and have high energy (calorie) and nutrient needs in proportion to their small body size.
- Children have small stomachs and may be physically unable to eat large meals.
- Each day children need three meals plus snacks based on nutritious foods. They also need adequate quantities of fluids.
- Snacks and drinks taken between meals should be sugar-free to prevent tooth decay.
- Children need fat as a concentrated source of calories. Low fat 'healthy eating' advice is not suitable for young children. Full fat spreads and whole milk dairy products are recommended.



- Children do not need sugar and sugary foods such as sweets, chocolate, soft drinks, honey or jam for energy. Starchy foods (eg bread, breakfast cereals, potatoes, pasta and rice) are better sources of energy as they also contain other important nutrients.
- The frequent intake of sugar and sugary foods between meals causes tooth decay. If taken, sugary foods and drinks should be kept to main mealtimes. Sugar may also appear on food labels as sucrose, glucose, syrup, fructose, dextrose.
- A nutrient-rich pudding should be offered each day, preferably based on milk and fruit (fresh, stewed or tinned).
- Young children should be given some fibre-rich foods, but a mixture of both white and wholemeal varieties of bread, pasta or breakfast cereal is more suitable for the under fives.

Between two and five years of age children should be gradually encouraged to move towards a diet that is lower in fat and higher in fibre.

- Dry, unprocessed bran should never be used as it can cause bloating, wind, loss of appetite and reduce absorption of important nutrients.
- There is no need to add salt to food either in cooking or at the table, as there is enough present in the food we eat. Too much salt is linked with high blood pressure later in life and may encourage a liking for salty food which is difficult to change. Salty snacks such as crisps should be limited.
- It is recommended that peanuts and products containing them, eg peanut butter, are not provided in the day care setting. This is to protect children who may be at risk of peanut allergy.

A varied balanced diet for the under fives

Growing children need plenty of energy (calories) and nutrients, eg protein, fat, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. This can be achieved by including a variety of foods from each of the four main food groups. The following tables outline the recommended servings from each of the four groups for a child in full day care receiving a main meal and two snacks. It is assumed that a nutritionally balanced evening meal will be provided in the child's own home.

Food group: Bread, cereals and potatoes

Recommended servings	What's included	Key nutrients	Notes
<p>Offer a minimum of one portion per child with each meal. Examples of one portion are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 slice of bread; • 1 small potato (60g); • 8 oven chips (50g); • 3 tbsp cooked pasta or 2 heaped tbsp boiled rice (80g); • 2 tbsp breakfast cereal. <p>Portion sizes should be increased according to appetite.</p>	<p>This group includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all types of bread, eg wholemeal, wheaten, granary, multigrain, white, brown, soda bread, potato bread, rolls, baps, chapattis; • crispbreads, savoury crackers, crumpets, pancakes; • breakfast cereals without added sugar, honey or chocolate, eg Weetabix, Ready Brek, porridge oats, Corn Flakes, Rice Krispies; • boiled, mashed or baked potatoes (chips should be limited to once a week); • pasta, noodles and rice. 	<p>The main nutrients provided are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • energy (calories); • B vitamins (needed for growth and activity); • fibre (needed for healthy bowels). <p>Some breakfast cereals are fortified with iron (needed for healthy blood).</p>	<p>These foods should also be offered as snacks.</p>

Food group: Fruit and vegetables

Recommended servings	What's included	Key nutrients	Notes
<p>Three child-sized portions should be offered each day in the childcare setting. A total of five portions of fruit and vegetables is recommended each day. It is assumed that the remaining two portions will be provided in the child's own home.</p> <p>Examples of one child-sized portion are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1/2 apple, 1/2 pear, 1/2 banana or 1/2 orange; • 1 tbsp fruit salad, tinned or stewed fruit; • 1/2 cup of strawberries or grapes; • 1 tbsp cooked vegetables; • 1 tbsp chopped raw or salad vegetables. 	<p>This group includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all types of fresh, frozen and canned vegetables, eg broccoli*, Brussels sprouts*, cabbage*, carrots, cauliflower*, mushrooms, parsnips, frozen peas*, peppers*, swede, sweetcorn, turnip; • all types of salad vegetables, eg lettuce, cucumber, tomato*; • all types of fresh fruit, eg apples, bananas, grapes, kiwi fruit*, oranges*; • all types of tinned fruit in juice, eg peaches, pears, pineapple, prunes; • stewed fruit; • dried fruit. <p>* All these are good sources of vitamin C.</p>	<p>The main nutrients provided are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vitamins, especially vitamin C (needed for general good health and to help absorb iron); • fibre; • iron (from dark green vegetables). 	<p>Fruits and raw vegetables make good snacks and are ideal as finger foods. Dried fruit is not recommended as a snack because it is a concentrated source of sugar, which may cause tooth decay.</p> <p>Frozen vegetables are high in vitamins.</p> <p>Vegetables can be added to soups, casseroles and stews.</p> <p>Do not overcook fruit and vegetables as this will reduce the vitamin content.</p>

Food group: Milk and milk products

Recommended servings	What's included	Key nutrients	Notes
<p>Allow a minimum of 300 mls (1/2 pint) of whole cow's milk per child from one year of age onwards.</p> <p>AND</p> <p>One other serving of a food from this group should be provided, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25g (1oz) of hard cheese; • 125g carton of yogurt; • a bowl of milk pudding. <p>Each of these provides equivalent amounts of calcium.</p>	<p>This group includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • milk; • cheese; • yogurt. 	<p>The main nutrients provided are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • calcium (needed to build strong bones and for nerve and muscle function); • protein (for growth); • fat (for calories); • vitamins A (needed for growth, a healthy respiratory and digestive tract and maintenance of skin); • vitamin D (needed to help absorb calcium and to build strong bones). 	<p>It is recommended that whole milk is used routinely in the childcare setting. Whole milk provides extra energy (calories) and vitamins A and D. This will help to ensure that the calorie and vitamin requirements of the majority of children are met.</p> <p>Milk can be used in drinks, on breakfast cereals, in milk puddings or sauces.</p> <p>Cheese can be added to jacket potatoes, spaghetti or toast. Grated cheese, cottage cheese, cheese portions or spreads can be used as sandwich fillers or on toast.</p>

Food group: Meat, fish and alternatives

Recommended servings	What's included	Key nutrients	Notes
<p>One serving of these foods should be taken at the main meal. Examples of one serving include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40-50g (1½-2oz) beef, pork, lamb, chicken or fish; • 2 fish fingers; • 1 egg; • 2-3 tbsp baked beans. <p>Four out of five main meals per week should include the above foods.</p> <p>Processed meat products should be limited to a maximum of one out of five main meals per week. Examples of one serving are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 chicken nuggets; • 4 fish bites; • 2 sausages; • 1 junior (2oz) burger . 	<p>This group includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all types of meat including beef*, lamb*, pork*, bacon*, ham*, liver*, chicken and turkey; • white fish, oily fish* (eg tuna and sardines*), fish cakes, fish fingers; • baked beans*, mushy peas*, butter beans*, kidney beans*, chickpeas*; • eggs* including boiled, scrambled, poached, omelette; • meat alternatives, eg soya mince, textured vegetable protein (TVP); • bean curd; • processed meats/meat products, eg chicken nuggets, sausages, sausage rolls and burgers. <p>*These foods are rich sources of iron and should be included regularly.</p>	<p>The main nutrients provided are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • protein; • iron (to prevent anaemia); • vitamins. 	<p>It is recommended that nuts and products containing them, eg peanut butter, are not provided in the childcare setting. This is to protect children who may be at risk of peanut allergy. All young children are at risk of choking on nuts.</p> <p>Red meats should be included at least twice a week. Mince is acceptable as red meat.</p> <p>Minced meat may be used for shepherd's pie, meatballs and spaghetti bolognese.</p> <p>Where possible use leaner cuts of meat and trim off visible fat.</p> <p>Processed meat products contain less protein and iron.</p> <p>All eggs must be well cooked.</p> <p>Vegetarian choices could include omelette; cheese and egg quiche; bean and pasta bake; macaroni cheese; vegetable lasagne.</p>



Snacks

The best snacks are those which are sugar-free or low in added sugar and packed with nutrients.

A variety of snacks should be offered. Examples are listed below:

- toast or bread* - wheaten, wholemeal, white, granary, potato bread and soda bread all make healthy snacks;
- scone, crumpet or pancake*;
- sandwiches - suitable fillings include banana, spreading cheese, egg, tomato, tuna and lean meat such as ham, chicken or turkey;
- pieces of fresh fruit** - sliced or chopped apples, bananas, pears, kiwi fruit, grapes and other seasonal fruits make healthy snacks for small children;
- raw vegetable sticks - carrot, cucumber, celery, tomato can all be sliced up or cut into sticks and make handy nibbles;
- natural yogurt or plain fromage frais - chopped fruit (eg banana, apple or mandarin orange) can be added to plain unsweetened yogurt, and makes a healthy sugar-free snack between meals. Fruit tinned in its own juice rather than syrup can also be used;
- cereal and milk - offer unsweetened varieties, eg Weetabix, Cornflakes, Ready Brek, Puffed Wheat.

*These should not be covered in sugary spreads, such as jam, honey or chocolate spread.

**Dried fruit is not recommended as a snack between meals as it contains concentrated sugar and may cause tooth decay. However, it can be included in main meals.

Foods and drinks which are high in sugar, eg sweets, biscuits, sweetened yogurts and desserts, are most damaging to teeth when they are taken between meals. This doesn't mean that they should never be taken, but they are less damaging to teeth if they are taken at the end of meals.

If you choose to offer biscuits occasionally, eg once or twice a week, these should be plain without chocolate or cream, eg plain crackers.

Drinks

- Milk or water is the recommended drink for young children.
- Pure unsweetened fruit juice, well diluted (one part juice to eight parts water) can be taken at main meals.
- Sweetened juices, squashes and minerals/fizzy drinks are not recommended. If used, they should be confined to main meals and squashes and juices should be well diluted. Sugar-free drinks contain artificial sweeteners which are not recommended for young children.
- Children should be introduced to a cup from six months. From one year all drinks should be from a cup and the use of a feeding bottle should be discontinued.

Note: It is recommended that these snacks and drinks should also be provided to any older children who attend after school clubs in the nursery/day care setting.

For guidance on suitable snacks and drinks for infants up to 12 months refer to pages 14 and 15.