

Active, growing children require good nutrition to build healthy bodies and to help them be the best they can be. Many attitudes towards food are shaped during early school years, forming the basis for future eating habits. As parents we can help our children build healthy foundations by encouraging a love of good food and good nutrition throughout these years.

Growing bodies

Primary school years are busy ones and children need good nutrition to help them concentrate at school and to fuel their day to day activities (play and sport). Children of this age are also constantly growing. As well as providing enough fuel for day to day activities, a child needs nutritious foods to grow and develop normally.

A healthy eating pattern

An eating pattern that includes a variety of foods from across the food groups will provide children with the range of nutrients and fuel they need. This means:

- Eating plenty of vegetables, legumes and fruits
- Eating plenty of cereals (preferably wholegrain), including bread, rice, pasta, and noodles
- Including lean meat, fish, poultry and/or alternatives
- Including milk, yogurt and cheese (reduced-fat varieties are not suitable for children under 2 years)

While the occasional 'extra' foods such as lollies, chips and take away foods are ok, if eaten too often they may result in poor intake of nourishing foods and an increased risk of becoming overweight, as well as an increased risk of tooth decay.

To be their best, children also need to be well hydrated. Children should be encouraged to drink water. Try to limit sweetened drinks such as soft drinks, cordials and fruit juice. If consumed in large amounts they can contribute to issues such as excess weight gain and tooth decay. As an alternative, a glass of milk is a nutritious drink that will contribute to the recommended three serves of dairy a day to make sure they get the calcium their growing bones need.

Get moving!

Being physically active is important for growing bodies too. In Australia, 23% of children are overweight or obese. Encouraging an active lifestyle along with a balanced diet is the best way to ensure a healthy weight. Australia's Physical Activity Guidelines for 5 to 12 year olds recommend:

- at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day. This could be running, swimming, dancing or a type of organized sport such as football or netball or just active play, and
- not more than two hours screen time (television, computer or electronic games) a day

Be active with your children and include physical activity in family outings and as part of your daily life.

Encouraging healthy habits

Primary school is a time where children are exposed to many influences outside of the family. Their social life increases and peers can play a large part in forming attitudes towards foods. They become more aware of food advertising and trends in the media and while shopping. At school, the canteen offers the opportunity for children to make their own food selections and food and nutrition will also be discussed by teachers as part of the school curriculum.

The best way to encourage children to be active and healthy is to be a good role model. Help them sift through all the information on food they are receiving and lead by example. Also remember that food is much more than simply fuel and nutrients. Food should taste good, food should be fun, food should be social – it should be enjoyed!

- While it is not always practical, wherever possible sitting down as a family to eat is a great way to lead by example - it makes food social and fun too!
- Primary school years are a time of exploration and learning. Offer children the opportunity to experience a wide range of foods with different tastes and textures.
- Children love being involved. Encourage them to help with the shopping and with the preparation of food.
- Helping children to grow food in their own garden is also great. It teaches them about how food gets to our table and is a great way to encourage eating vegetables!

The importance of dairy foods

As one of the five food groups, dairy foods have an important role to play in a healthy diet. Dairy foods such as milk, cheese and yogurt contain at least 10 essential nutrients, including:

- Protein
- Carbohydrate
- Vitamins (A, B12 and riboflavin)
- Minerals (calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, potassium and zinc)

Bone health

Dairy foods are probably best known for calcium and the role it plays in building strong bones. Along with the rest of their body, children's bones grow rapidly. A calcium-rich diet during childhood helps maximise peak bone mass and helps reduce the risk of osteoporosis and fractures in later life.

Food and Fitness for Children

Primary school children are recommended to consume the following amounts of calcium each day to ensure their bones achieve optimal strength:

Age (years)	Recommended Dietary Intake (RDI) for calcium
4-8	700mg
9-11	1000mg
12-13	1300mg

Three serves of dairy foods every day will provide children with most of their calcium requirements. One serve of dairy is equal to:

- 1 glass (250mL) of milk
- 1 tub (200g) of yogurt
- 2 slices (40g) of cheese

Dental health

Despite being largely preventable, tooth decay is still a very common health problem in Australian children.

In addition to good oral hygiene (regular brushing), good nutrition and our eating habits play an important role in preventing dental disease. Dairy foods have a specific role to play in dental health as they contain a unique combination of special anti-decay nutrients such as calcium, phosphorus and the milk protein, casein.

The Australian Dental Association makes the following dietary recommendations for preventing tooth decay:

- Being careful about how often you have sugar in your food and drinks is the best way to prevent and treat tooth decay.
- Rinse your mouth with water after having a sugary food or drink.
- Have a small amount of cheese after sugary food or drink. This will help to neutralise the acid produced by the oral bacteria.
- Using sugarless chewing gum may help protect your teeth by stimulating extra saliva. Saliva is very important in protecting your teeth from decay.

3 serves every day

The Australian Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents recommend milk, cheese and yogurt, because of the important nutrients, particularly calcium, they provide. In fact, milk and other dairy foods are the largest contributors of calcium in the diets of Australian children.

But milk, cheese and yogurt also give us at least nine other essential nutrients – like vitamin A for healthy eye sight, protein and zinc for growth and development, and vitamin B12 to help keep blood healthy.

In Australia we have a wide range of dairy foods to choose from. There is a product to suit every taste and occasion. Yet despite this, the latest National Children's Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey has found that many children are not consuming enough dairy food to meet their calcium requirement.

Here are some ideas to help include dairy foods in your child's daily diet.

Breakfast

We all know breakfast is the most important meal of the day especially for fueling children's minds and bodies ready for school. Low Glycaemic Index (GI) foods which provide a slow release of energy are great choices for breakfast. Dairy foods have a low GI and are great for breakfast.

- For a winter warmer nothing beats a steaming milky porridge or in the warmer months pour some ice cold milk on your child's favourite cereal.
- Grilled cheese on toast is always a favourite.
- Yogurt and muesli mix. Great in the yogurt tub for a breakfast on the run.
- Fruit and yogurt smoothie. Great for children who dislike breakfast!

Lunch

Dairy foods are great for the school lunch box.

Try some of these ideas:

- Portions of cheese with dried fruit and biscuits.
- Sandwiches/pita bread with cheese and choice of salad and spread.
- Freeze a yogurt tub the night before. Helps keep the rest of the lunch box cool too!

Snacks

For those after school munchies give these ideas a try:

- An ice cold milkshake or smoothie is a great filler. Let your imagination run wild with flavour combinations.
- A yogurt based dip with crackers and vegetable sticks.

Evening meal

Great family recipe ideas for evening meals can be found on Dairy Australia's website www.dairy.com.au/recipes

