

Healthy Eating for Kids & Teens

(Ages 3 to 17)

Healthy eating habits start early. Give your kids and teens the nutrition they need now to help them build a healthy eating routine that lasts a lifetime.

Eat Real Food

Help your kids and teens eat meals and snacks built on whole, nutrient-dense foods. Encourage them to choose a variety of healthy foods from these food groups:



Protein foods — such as eggs, poultry, seafood, and meat from animal sources, and plant-based sources, such as beans, peas, lentils, legumes, nuts, seeds, and soy.



Dairy — such as milk, yogurt, cheese, and, depending on your dietary needs, lactose-free or lactose-reduced products or fortified dairy alternatives. For kids age 10 and under, full-fat dairy products support energy needs and brain development.



Vegetables — such as broccoli, carrots, spinach, peppers, sweet potatoes, beets, okra, and jicama.



Fruits — such as berries, apples, oranges, bananas, grapes, and mangos.



Healthy fats — found in many whole foods, including seafood (especially salmon, sardines, and other fatty fish that provide omega-3 fats), nuts, seeds, avocados, eggs, dairy, meat, poultry, and olive oil.



Whole grains — such as brown rice, fiber-rich whole-grain bread, oatmeal, and whole-grain pasta.



Prioritize Key Nutrients at Every Stage

Help your child choose healthy foods to get enough of **these nutrients**:



Calcium builds and maintains strong bones and helps your child's muscles, nerves, and blood vessels work. Dairy products and fortified dairy alternatives, canned sardines and salmon, and leafy greens, such as kale and bok choy, are all good sources of calcium.

Vitamin D helps your child's body absorb calcium, a building block for strong bones. It also helps their immune system fight off germs. Choose protein foods such as egg yolks, mackerel, salmon, and trout. Dairy products, including milk and yogurt, also provide vitamin D.



Dietary fiber helps keep your child's digestion regular and supports their heart health. It can also help them feel full longer. Choose whole grains, such as whole-grain bread, brown rice, and oatmeal. Fruits, vegetables, beans, peas, and lentils are also good sources of fiber.

Iron helps blood carry oxygen to your child's muscles and other parts of their body. Iron is especially important for girls as they start menstruating (having a monthly period). Many protein foods are good sources of iron, including beef, turkey, crab, shrimp, beans, peas, and lentils. You can also get iron from dark green vegetables, such as spinach and Swiss chard, and from fortified whole-grain breakfast cereals. Pairing iron-containing foods with foods high in vitamin C, such as oranges, tomatoes, or bell peppers, can increase absorption of iron.



Zinc helps your child's immune system fight off germs and supports growth and brain development. Meat, beans, and some seafood are good sources of zinc.

Protein supports growth and development, especially during childhood and the teen years. Choose eggs, poultry, seafood, and meat from animal sources or plant sources of protein, such as beans, peas, lentils, legumes, nuts, seeds, and soy.



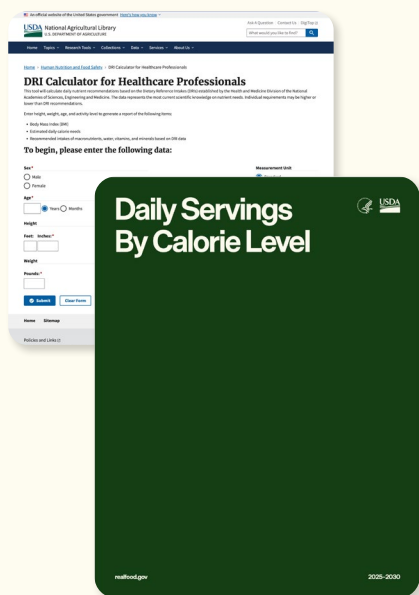
Healthy fats provide energy and help your child's body absorb vitamins from food. Choose meat, poultry, eggs, nuts, seeds, avocados, and olive oil. Omega-3 fat-rich fish, including salmon and sardines, are also a good source of healthy fats.



How much food does my child need?

Eating a healthy diet with the right amount of calories is important for your child's growth and development during childhood and their teenage years.

- Use the **Dietary Reference Intake (DRI) Calculator** to estimate how many calories and nutrients your child needs each day: nal.usda.gov/human-nutrition-and-food-safety/dri-calculator
- Visit the **Daily Servings Guide** for serving size suggestions for each food group based on daily calorie needs: cdn.realfood.gov/Daily_Serving_Sizes_508.pdf



What about picky eaters?

Picky eating is very common in young kids — so don't be discouraged if they don't want to try new foods. Over time, you can help your child explore a wider range of healthy foods.

Try these tips:

- **Offer each new food many times** — kids may need up to 10 tries before they get used to it. Children's food preferences develop over time. Giving them many chances to try a food can help them learn to enjoy new flavors.
- **Take the pressure off** — encourage your child to try a new food, but don't push them to eat it all.
- **Try different prep methods** — kids who don't like cooked veggies might love raw, crunchy vegetables.
- **Make new foods easy to eat** — try cutting up fruits and vegetables into small, bite-sized pieces.
- **Make food fun beyond the plate** — let kids see, smell, or touch new foods; let them read books about foods; or involve them with food activities, such as meal prep.



Build Healthy Habits

Involving your kids and teens in choosing and preparing their food can help them get excited about healthy eating. Try these tips to help build healthy eating behaviors that will last a lifetime:

- **Model healthy habits for your kids and teens** — let your kids see you making healthy choices, such as eating vegetables and drinking water instead of soda. They'll want to try them, too!
- **Celebrate your family food traditions** — teach your kids and teens about your favorite healthy meals and foods from your culture. Familiar and culturally meaningful foods can help build positive eating behaviors.
- **Bring your kids and teens to the store** — let them pick out new healthy foods to try together and show them ways to save money, such as choosing fresh vegetables and fruits that are in season or frozen options. Being involved can help kids feel more interested in trying new foods.
- **Cook meals together** — make cooking meals fun and a regular part of your family's routine. Try simple, kid-friendly recipes so they can learn and feel confident in the kitchen. For example, ask your kids or teens to help chop vegetables for snacks. Hands-on experiences can make kids more willing to try new foods.
- **Make healthy snacks available and easy to choose** — keeping healthy options such as unsalted nuts or pre-cut fruits around is great for when your kid needs a snack or your busy teen needs to grab something to go.
- **Have your kids and teens pack their own lunches with healthy, real foods** — and be sure to have them bring a refillable water bottle to help them stay hydrated all day long.
- **Encourage your kids to choose healthy food options wherever they go** — school, sporting activities, a friend's house, or a restaurant.



Avoid Highly Processed Foods, Added Sugars, and Refined Carbohydrates

Everyone, including your kids and teens, should avoid highly processed foods, added sugars, and refined carbohydrates. That means:

✓ Choose

Choose whole vegetables and fruits, which are naturally low in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium.



– Limit

Limit highly processed, refined carbohydrates (processing removes fiber and nutrients), such as white bread, ready-to-eat or packaged breakfast options, flour tortillas, and crackers.



✗ Avoid

Avoid highly processed packaged, prepared, ready-to-eat foods that are high in added sugars (for example, from table sugar, syrups, and honey) and sodium. These foods include snacks, desserts, and candy.

Avoid sugar-sweetened beverages, such as soda, fruit drinks, sugary coffee and tea, and energy drinks. Choose sparkling water, still water, or unsweetened beverages instead, and add fruits or herbs for extra flavor.



What are some ways to incorporate vegetables and fruits in my kid's diet?

Smoothies are a great way to help your kid or teen get their daily vegetable and fruit servings. Some smoothie recipes, like the one below, also help with meeting dairy needs. Use frozen vegetables and fruits in smoothies — they are often more affordable, are just as nutritious, and last longer than fresh produce. Here's a smoothie recipe you can use:

Strawberry Banana Fruit Smoothie

Makes four 1-cup servings

Ingredients

- **3 cups of strawberries**, fresh or unsweetened frozen
- **1 banana**, large
- **2 cups of milk** or fortified dairy alternative
- **1 cup of plain yogurt** or plain non-dairy yogurt
- Optional**
 - **1 cup of ice**
 - **Handful of spinach**, fresh or frozen with no added salt

Preparation

1. If berries are frozen, defrost just enough so they will blend easily. If fresh, rinse thoroughly with water.
2. In a tall blender, add strawberries, banana, milk, yogurt, and ice and spinach, if including.
3. Blend until smooth, usually around 45 seconds.



How much added sugars, sodium, or saturated fat is okay for my child?

Many highly processed foods are high in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium. The Nutrition Facts label can help you choose foods low in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium. A percent (%) Daily Value of 5% or less of a nutrient is generally considered low. More often, choose foods that are lower in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium.

Here are some more tips:

✓ Choose

Choose foods that are lower in added sugars. For example:

- Whole-grain cereal (such as oatmeal) with no more than 2.5 grams of added sugars per serving
- A dairy snack (such as yogurt) with no more than 2.5 grams of added sugars per serving

– Limit

Limit added sugars to 10 grams or less at each meal.

Keep in mind that no amount of added sugars is recommended as part of a healthy diet.

Limit saturated fat to 10% or less of daily calories. For example, if you're eating 2,000 calories a day, aim for less than about 20 grams (200 calories) of saturated fat.

Limit how much sodium your child eats per day. The recommended sodium limit depends on your child's age:

- **Age 3:** no more than 1,200 milligrams (mg) of sodium per day
- **Ages 4 to 8:** no more than 1,500 mg of sodium per day
- **Ages 9 to 13:** no more than 1,800 mg per day
- **Ages 14 and above:** no more than 2,300 mg per day

Kids and teens who play sports or are very active may need more sodium to offset what they lose when they sweat.

Nutrition Facts

8 servings per container

Serving size 2/3 cup (55g)

Amount per serving

Calories 230

% Daily Value

Total Fat 8g 10%

Saturated Fat 1g 5%

Trans Fat 0g

Cholesterol 0mg 0%

Sodium 160mg 7%

Total Carbohydrate 37g 13%

Dietary Fiber 4g 14%

Total Sugars 12g

Includes 10g Added Sugars 20%

Protein 3g

Vitamin D 2mcg 10%

Calcium 260mg 20%

Iron 8mg 45%

Potassium 235mg 6%

* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.



Keep These Tips in Mind

Food Safety

Teach your kids about food safety. Have them wash their hands with soap and water when they handle food and before they eat. Make family food prep a team effort, and show them how to wash whole vegetables and fruits before cooking them or eating them raw. For more tips, visit [FoodSafety.gov](https://www.foodsafety.gov).

Caffeine

Kids age 10 and younger should avoid caffeinated drinks, such as soda, coffee, tea, and energy drinks. If older kids have caffeinated drinks, encourage them to avoid energy drinks, soda, and sweetened tea and coffee drinks, which have lots of sugar and are often highly processed.

Fruit Juice

Most of the time, choose whole fruits instead of juice. Whole fruits have fiber your kids need to stay healthy. If your child does drink juice:

- Provide 100% fruit juice without added sugars
- Offer small servings (about 4 ounces or half a cup)
- Mix 100% fruit juice with water or sparkling water



Learn More About Healthy Eating

Visit [RealFood.gov](https://www.realfood.gov) to learn about healthy eating and about the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. For more resources, please visit odphp.health.gov/HealthyEating.

