Feeding Your Preschooler

MyPyramid for Preschoolers
Are you and your preschooler having problems at mealtimes? Then you are not alone in the challenge to get your child to eat well!

It’s hard to know what to do when your preschooler is a picky eater or goes on an eating jag and wants only one food. It’s also difficult to handle conflicting advice from well-meaning relatives, who want to tell you how to feed your child.

MyPyramid for Preschoolers can help you sort it all out. This section of MyPyramid was introduced in October 2008 by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). It is designed specifically to help parents and caregivers help two to five-year-old children eat well, stay active and be healthy. The information is written in parent-friendly terms and based on advice from leading experts in nutrition for preschoolers.

A copy of the food pyramid for preschoolers is available at the end of this fact sheet and at www.mypyramid.gov/preschoolers. The MyPyramid for Preschoolers website features these materials:

MyPyramid Plan for Preschoolers: For a customized eating plan for your preschooler, simply enter their age, gender and activity level. You can print out a colorful guide of what and how much your child needs from each food group every day. The eating plan links to information on each of the food groups, beverages, snacks, salt and “extras” (solid fats and added sugars).

Growth During the Preschool Years: Because toddlers and preschoolers grow at a slower rate than infants, they need fewer calories and tend to eat less. The average two to five-year-old gains 4 to 5 pounds and grows about 2½ inches taller each year.

Proper growth is one of the best signs of good health and nutrition in children. Factors that cause children’s heights and weights to vary include: their family history; their sex; nutrition; amount of sleep and health status.

To receive a user friendly, customized growth chart, enter your child’s height, weight and age. You can print a Body Mass Index and a Height-for-Age chart and take it to your preschooler’s next doctor’s visit.

Developing Healthy Eating Habits: Is your preschooler a picky eater, who refuses to eat anything green just because of the color? Or, do they go on food jags and only eat one food, such as peanut butter sandwiches?

In the early years children are very impressionable. Parents and caregivers play an important role in helping preschoolers develop healthy eating habits and positive attitudes toward food, which are likely to stay with them later in life. It is important for
your preschooler to establish good nutrition and lifestyle habits that can reduce their risks for obesity, heart disease, cancer, and other chronic diseases.

This section of MyPyramid for Preschoolers provides “Mom-tested” messages that combine expert guidance and real-life suggestions, and it includes these topics:

- Setting a Good Example
- Offering a Variety of Foods
- Helping Children Know When They’ve Had Enough
- Following a Meal and Snack Schedule
- Making Mealtime a Family Time
- Coping with Picky Eating
- Helping Children Eat New Foods
- Kitchen Activities Preschoolers Can Help With
- Behavioral Milestones Related to Eating

Physical Activity: Physical activity is anything that gets your child moving. On most or all days, children should get at least 60 minutes of physical activity, but it doesn’t have to be all at once. Add physical activity into your preschooler’s day.

Parents are role models in physical activity as well as in healthy eating behaviors. Habits are “caught, not taught,” so show your child what you want them to learn by being physically active yourself.

Discover why physical activity is important and what types of physical activity are appropriate at this age. Get ideas for family activities, age-appropriate activities and indoor activities.

Food Safety: Preschoolers’ immune systems are still developing, which makes it easy for them to get sick. It is very important to follow food safety guidelines to avoid foodborne illness.

This section includes both general food safety advice and specific messages for preschoolers. A few of the topics are: the importance of hand washing; foods that should be avoided, and foods that can be choking hazards.

Sample Meal & Snack Patterns: There are two different sample meal and snack patterns available at each of these four calorie levels: 1,000; 1,200; 1,400 and 1,600. Each one shows how to divide a MyPyramid daily eating plan into three meals and two snacks.

Several menu ideas are included for each meal or snack in the pattern, and the recommended amounts from each food group are shown. Ideas for planning meals for preschoolers also are included.

Food Groups & Amounts Needed

MyPyramid for Preschoolers Recommendation: MyPyramid divides food into five major groups: grains; vegetables; fruits; milk, and meat & beans. The food groups are equally important for good health and proper growth. Children need to eat a variety of foods every day, because each food group provides some, but not all, of the nutrients and energy preschoolers need.

Here is a general guideline for how much a preschooler should eat from each food group. The child’s age, gender and activity level determine the exact amounts needed.

Two to Three-Year-Olds:

Daily:
- grain - 3 ounces (or ounce equivalents). Half of them should be whole grains.
- vegetables* - 1 cup
- fruit - 1 cup
- milk and milk products - 2 cups
- meat and beans - 2 ounce equivalents

*Vegetables are divided into subgroups. It is not necessary to eat vegetables from all subgroups every day. However, over a week, try to consume the amounts listed from each subgroup in order to reach your daily intake recommendation.

Weekly Amounts of Vegetables:
- dark green vegetables = 1 cup
- orange vegetables = ½ cup
- dry beans and peas = ½ cup
- starchy vegetables = 1½ cups
- other vegetables = 4 cups

Oils are not a food group, but a small amount is needed for good health. Aim for your preschooler to get 2-4 teaspoons of oils a day. Choose oils from fish, nuts, and oils that are liquid at room
temperature (e.g. olive oil, corn oil, soybean oil and canola oil). Limit extra fats and sugars.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, a low-fat eating plan is not advised for children less than two years of age. Fat is an essential nutrient that supplies energy, or calories, that they need for growth and active play. As children eat with their family, they should be encouraged to gradually choose foods with less fat and saturated fat. By age five, their overall food choices should be low in fat like older members of the family.

**Four to Five-Year-Olds:**

**Daily:**
- grain - 4 to 5 ounces (or ounce equivalents)
  Half of them should be whole grains.
- vegetables* - 1½ cups
- fruit - 1 to 1½ cups
- milk and milk products - 2 cups
- meat and beans - 3 to 4 ounce equivalents

*Vegetables are divided into subgroups. It is not necessary to eat vegetables from all subgroups every day. However, over a week, try to consume the amounts listed from each subgroup in order to reach your daily intake recommendation.

**Weekly Amounts of Vegetables:**
- dark green vegetables = 1½ cups
- orange vegetables = 1 cup
- dry beans and peas = 1 cup
- starchy vegetables = 2½ cups
- other vegetables = 4½ cups

Oils are not a food group, but a small amount is needed for good health. Aim for your preschooler to get 2-4 teaspoons of oils a day. Choose oils from fish, nuts, and oils that are liquid at room temperature (e.g. olive oil, corn oil, soybean oil and canola oil). Limit extra fats and sugars.

**Promote Healthy Eating Choices With Books**

Books allow children to read about food and build experiences to encourage healthy food choices. As you look at picture books or read stories to your child, involve them in identifying foods, colors, tastes, food groups and healthy food choices. Select story books with colorful illustrations of healthy foods that promote MyPyramid and the Dietary Guidelines. Here are a few good choices.

**Grains:** *Bread, Bread, Bread* by Ann Morris and *The Little Red Hen* by Margo Zemach

**Vegetables:** *Tops and Bottoms* by Janet Stevens and *Oliver’s Vegetables* by Vivian French

**Fruits:** *Fruits and Vegetables from A to Z* by Lois Ehlert and *Oliver’s Fruit Salad* by Vivian French

**Milk:** *Milk from Cow to Carton* by Aliki and *Cow* by Jules Older

**Picky Eaters:** *Bread and Jam for Frances* by Russell Hoban and *DW the Picky Eater* by Marc Brown

To find additional books, visit the following web sites:

- Michigan’s Team Nutrition Website at www.tn.fcs.msue.msu.edu/booklist.html
- University of Missouri Family Nutrition Education Programs at http://outreach.missouri.edu/fnep/childrensbooks.htm
MyPyramid Food Plans for All Ages

MyPyramid food plans are designed for the general public ages two and over. One pyramid does not fit everyone, so 12 different ones were created for people whose calorie needs range from 1,000 to 3,200 per day. To personalize your own eating plan, go to www.MyPyramid.gov.

MyPyramid reflects the government’s 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, including the importance of balancing what we eat with our physical activity. People of all ages can find simple, personalized help in making healthy food choices and being physically active every day. However, MyPyramid food plans are not therapeutic diets.

For More Information

For related information on feeding your preschooler, refer to:
HGIC 4104, Picky Eaters.
HGIC 4105, Making Mealtimes Pleasant.
HGIC 4107, Partners for Healthy Eating.
HGIC 4109, Healthy Eating Habits for Children.
HGIC 4110, Non-Food Rewards for Kids.
HGIC 4113, Kids in the Kitchen.

Sources:

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by Janis G. Hunter, HGIC Nutrition Specialist, and Katherine L. Cason, Professor, Food Science and Human Nutrition Department, Clemson University. (New 12/08.)

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MyPyramid for Preschoolers

Eat Right. Exercise. Have Fun.

MyPyramid.gov

Grains
Vegetables
Fruits
Milk
Meat & Beans

Make half your grains whole
Vegetables
Fruits
Milk
Meat & Beans

Dinner is a food group, but you need some for good health. Get your oils from fish, nuts, and liquid oils such as corn oil, soybean oil, and canola oil.

Find your balance between food and fun
Fats and sugars — know your limits

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