Smart Snacking

“I’m hungry! What can I eat?” This is often the first words that a child says when they get home from school.

If your child or teen’s next mealtime is more than an hour away, offer them some healthy ready-to-eat foods when they have a snack attack. They need the energy and nutrients provided by snacks. Very young children have small stomachs, so they can’t eat much at one time nor go as long without food as adults can.

Give Your Child a “Smart Snack”

A “smart snack” eaten between meals should:

- provide a child extra energy and nutrients.
- contain two food groups from MyPyramid.
- look and taste good.
- “tide” a child over until the next meal.
- be smaller than a regular meal.
- be fun to eat.
- be quick, convenient and easy to make.
- be low in sugar and fat, which can cause the child to become overweight.

Think of a snack as a mini-meal that helps provide nutrients and food energy that children and teens need to grow, learn and be physically active. Snacks can be single foods (e.g. carrot sticks or an apple) or combination foods (e.g. a peanut butter sandwich or a slice of pizza). According to a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) study, after-school snacks provide about one-third of children’s calories.

It can be hard for children to get all the nutrients and calories they need in three meals a day, especially if they are physically active. In fact, most young children do best when they eat four to six times a day. Nutritious snacks can provide vitamins and minerals that children do not get from their main meals. Research shows that many kids do not get enough iron, vitamin A or vitamin C.

Plan Snacks Using the Food Guide Pyramid

Offer your child snacks that fulfill part of the daily recommendation for the five basic food groups in MyPyramid, USDA’s food guide pyramid. Choose a wide variety of nutrient-rich foods from every food group for snacks that can be eaten at home or “on the go.” Here are a few examples.

Foods marked with an * may cause choking in children under three years of age.

Grains:

- cracker stacks (wheat crackers with cheese spread)
- ready-to-eat cereals, with or without milk
- flavored mini rice cakes or popcorn cakes*
- breads of all kinds (e.g. multigrain, rye and wheat)
- pretzels
- popcorn*
- trail mix (ready-to-eat cereals mixed with raisins or other dried fruit)*
- graham crackers

Vegetables:

- vegetable sticks (e.g. baby carrots*, celery*, broccoli*, cauliflower, cucumber, squash, and red, yellow or green pepper)
- celery stuffed with peanut butter*
- cherry tomatoes cut in small pieces
- steamed broccoli, green beans or sugar peas with low-fat dip
- 100% vegetable juice
**Fruits:**
- apple* ring sandwiches (peanut butter* on apple rings)
- orange or tangerine sections
- chunks of banana or pineapple
- canned fruits packed in juice
- juice box (100% juice)
- grapes* or raisins*
- berries
- popsicles made with unsweetened 100% fruit juice

MyPyramid recommends whole fruit instead of fruit juice for most fruit choices. Whole fruit provides fiber in addition to the vitamins and minerals found in fruit juice. Always serve 100% fruit juice rather than a less expensive, high-sugar fruit drink.

**Milk:**
- milkshakes or smoothies made from milk and fruit
- cheese slices with thin apple wedges
- string cheese or individually wrapped cheese slices
- mini yogurt cups (low-fat fruit yogurt)

Milk is the most nutritious beverage for all children, because it provides calcium and vitamin D needed for growth of bones and teeth. Low-fat or fat-free (skim) milk has the same nutritional value as whole milk but less fat. It doesn’t matter if it’s white or chocolate milk, although chocolate-flavored milk is likely to have more sugar.

Children under two years of age need the extra fat found in whole milk to grow and develop. Do not give them low-fat or fat-free milk.

Because hard cheeses are high in saturated fat, serve them in small portions along with other foods like fruits, vegetables or whole-grain crackers.

**Meat & Beans:**
- hard-cooked eggs (wedges or slices)
- peanut butter* spread thin on crackers or whole grain bread
- bean dip spread thin on crackers
- a handful of nuts*

Nuts are a good source of many vitamins and minerals but are high in calories. Serve in small handfuls or along with another food, such as fruit.


**Keys to Smart Snacking for Young Children**

1. Buy several of your child’s favorite snack foods from each of the five food groups, and let your child select their daily “fun food.”
2. Limit a young child’s snacks to items that contain no more than 150 calories.
3. Vary snacks daily to keep the child’s interest. This also allows you to introduce new foods to a young child.
4. Let snacks fill in the gaps. For example, when your child misses juice for breakfast, offer them fruit for their morning snack.
5. Show the child where snack foods are kept in the kitchen.
6. Put nutrient-rich foods on lower shelves in the refrigerator, pantry or cabinet. Store chips, cookies and other “sometimes” foods in less convenient locations out of reach.
7. Keep fresh fruit on the counter within sight and easy reach of the child.
8. Wash and cut up vegetables for ready-to-eat snacks right out of the refrigerator.
9. Make snack foods visible by storing them in see-through containers, clear plastic bags or containers covered in plastic wrap.
10. For grab-and-go eating, buy single-serve containers of food (e.g. milk, raisins, juice, baby carrots, fruit cups and pudding).
11. Serve a small child a child-size portion of a beverage. They sometimes drink their beverage first, because it is fast and easy to handle. This makes them feel full, and they may not want to eat anything else, yet they are hungry again in an hour.
12. 100% fruit juice can be substituted for milk occasionally, but limit the amount of fruit juice that a child drinks. It may keep them from eating enough solid foods and can cause tooth decay.
Easy-to-Make Snack Foods
Have fun with your young child by making these healthy snacks that use a variety of foods from the different food groups.

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**Milk Shake-ups:** Pour milk, juice and ice in a covered container. Shake!

**Fruit Juice Pops:** Freeze fruit juice in small paper cups or ice cube trays.

**Ants on a Log:** Fill celery sticks* with peanut butter* and top with raisins.*

**Banana Split Salad:** Slice bananas lengthwise. Top with a scoop of cottage cheese. Spoon fruit cocktail over the top.

**Crunchy Banana:** Peel a banana. Roll it in peanut butter* or yogurt and crushed cereal. Freeze!

**Frozen Grapes:** Freeze whole seedless grapes* for a refreshing treat that is fat-free.

**Cinnamon Toast:** Toast whole wheat bread. Spread a little butter on top and sprinkle with cinnamon sugar.

**Fancy Sandwiches:** Cut bread into shapes with a cookie cutter. Spread with favorite toppings. Or, dip small triangles of pita bread into low-fat hummus.

**Make-a-Face Sandwich:** This snack is intended for children who are three years of age and older. Do not serve to younger children, because they may choke.

Use a saltine, a whole grain cracker, a large graham cracker, one bagel half or a slice of bread cut into a circle. Spread the bread with peanut butter*, refried beans or low-fat cream cheese.

Create a pyramid face with a variety of toppings. For example, make “hair” with a tablespoon of shredded carrots, shredded cheese or coconut. Create “eyes” with two large green peas, raisins*, dried apricots or cranberries.* Use half a grape for the nose, and make a mouth with nuts*, seeds*, three or four raisins*, or a slice of apple or bell pepper.

Try to make the face using at least one food from each food group in MyPyramid, and identify the food group in which each of the foods belongs.

**Party Mix:** Mix 1 cup dry cereal and ½ cup small pretzel sticks. Place on cookie sheet. Coat with 2 tablespoons melted butter; sprinkle with Parmesan cheese. Bake at 250° F for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally.

**Healthy Trail Mix:** Combine 1 cup whole grain oat cereal, ¼ cup chopped walnuts or other nuts*, and ¼ cup dried cranberries or other dried fruit.*

**Quick Pizza:** Any bread can be used for the pizza crust. Top it with shredded low-fat mozzarella cheese and your favorite vegetables. Toast or bake it at a low setting until the cheese melts and the bread is crispy. Salsa and fat-free sour cream are optional toppings.

**Roll-up Salad:** Spread a leaf of lettuce or cabbage with peanut butter*. Place a celery* or carrot* stick in the middle. Roll up the leaf with the carrot or celery in the center.

**Treasure Log:** Lay a piece of cheese on a thin slice of meat. Roll into a log shape.

For more snack ideas, refer to:
- HGIC 4103, *Feeding Your Preschooler*.
- HGIC 4104, *Picky Eaters*.
- HGIC 4114, *Packing Lunches for School-Age Kids*.
- HGIC 4203, *Planning for Snacks*.
- HGIC 4246, *Packing Lunches for Work or School*, and
- HGIC 4123, *Snacks With 100 Calories or Less*.

**Teen Snacking**
Here are the primary nutrition issues with teen snacking.
- Teens replace nutrient-rich meals with high-calorie snacks.
- Teens consume excess calories through mindless or emotional snacking.
• Teens don’t control the amount of food eaten and often choose “supersized” and “mega” portions of food.
• Teens consume too many foods and drinks that are high in fat (total, saturated and trans fats), salt (sodium), cholesterol and added sugars (e.g. regular soft drinks, sweetened tea, candy chips and cookies).

Teens have high energy and nutrient needs, especially during their growth spurt. Encourage them to snack smart on nutritious foods, such as milk, 100% fruit or vegetable juice, regular-size burgers, fruit, raw vegetables, yogurt or cereal with milk.

Sources:

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