



Healthy food for school-age children: the five food groups

Key points

- **School-age children need to eat foods from all five healthy food groups – vegetables, fruit, grain foods, dairy and protein.**
- **Healthy foods have nutrients that are important for growth, development and learning.**
- **Limit salty, fatty and sugary foods, low-fibre foods, and drinks with caffeine or a lot of sugar.**

What is healthy food for kids?

Healthy food for school-age children includes a wide variety of fresh foods from the **five food groups**:

- vegetables
- fruit
- grain foods
- reduced-fat dairy
- protein.

Each food group has different nutrients, which your child's body needs to grow and work properly. That's why we need to eat a range of foods from across all five food groups.

Fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegies give your child energy, vitamins, anti-oxidants, fibre and water. These nutrients help to protect your child from diseases later in life, including diseases like heart disease, stroke and some cancers.

Encourage your child to choose fruit and vegetables at every meal and for snacks. This includes fruit and vegies of different colours, textures and tastes, both fresh and cooked.

Wash fruit to remove dirt or chemicals, and leave any edible skin on, because the skin contains nutrients too.



Many children seem to be 'fussy' about eating fruit and vegies (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/nutrition-fitness/healthy-eating-habits/vegetables>). You can help by being a healthy eating role model. If your child sees you eating a wide range of vegetables and fruit, your child is more likely to try them too.

Grain foods

Grain foods include **bread, pasta, noodles, breakfast cereals, couscous, rice, corn, quinoa, polenta, oats and barley**. These foods give children the energy they need to grow, develop and learn.

Grain foods with a low glycaemic index (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/nutrition-fitness/nutrients/carbohydrates-gi>), like wholegrain pasta and breads, will give your child longer-lasting energy and keep them feeling fuller for longer.

Reduced-fat dairy foods

Key dairy foods are **milk, cheese and yoghurt**. These foods are good sources of protein and calcium. Try to offer your child different kinds of dairy each day – for example, drinks of milk, cheese slices or bowls of yoghurt.

Children aged over two years can have reduced-fat dairy products.

If you're thinking of giving your child dairy alternatives, it's best to talk to your [paediatrician](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/paediatrician) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/paediatrician>), [GP](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/general-practitioner) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/general-practitioner>) or [child and family health nurse](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/child-family-health-nurse) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/child-family-health-nurse>).

Protein

Protein-rich foods include **lean meat, fish, chicken, eggs, beans, lentils, chickpeas, tofu and nuts**. These foods are important for your child's growth and muscle development.

These foods also contain other useful vitamins and minerals like [iron](#), [zinc](#), [vitamin B12](#) and [omega-3 fatty acids](#). Iron and omega-3 fatty acids from red meat and oily fish are particularly important for your child's brain development and learning.



Try to include a few different food groups at every meal and snack. Have a look at our [illustrated dietary guidelines for children aged 4-8 years](https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/nutrition-fitness/daily-food-guides/dietary-guide-4-8-years) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/nutrition-fitness/daily-food-guides/dietary-guide-4-8-years>) for more information about daily food portions and recommendations. You can also speak to a [dietitian](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/dietitian) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/dietitian>) if you have concerns about your child's eating.

Healthy drinks: water

Water is the healthiest drink for children. It's also the cheapest. Most tap water is fortified with fluoride for strong teeth too.

Foods and drinks to limit

It's best to limit the amount of 'sometimes' food your child eats. This means your child will have more room for healthy, everyday foods.

'Sometimes' foods include **fast food, takeaway and junk food** like hot chips, potato chips, dim sims, pies, burgers and takeaway pizza. They also include cakes, chocolate, lollies, biscuits, doughnuts and pastries.

'Sometimes' foods can be high in salt, saturated fat and sugar, and low in fibre. Regularly eating these foods can increase the risk of health conditions like [childhood obesity](https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/nutrition-fitness/common-concerns/child-obesity) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/nutrition-fitness/common-concerns/child-obesity>) and [type-2 diabetes](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/type-2-diabetes) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/type-2-diabetes>).

You should also limit your child's **sweet drinks**. This includes fruit juice, cordials, sports drinks, flavoured waters, soft drinks and flavoured milks. Sweet drinks are high in sugar and low in nutrients.

Too many sweet drinks can lead to unhealthy weight gain, obesity and [tooth decay](https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/health-daily-care/dental-care/tooth-decay) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/health-daily-care/dental-care/tooth-decay>). These drinks fill your child up and can make them less hungry for healthy meals. If children regularly have sweet drinks when they're young, it can kick off an unhealthy lifelong habit.

Foods and drinks with **caffeine** aren't recommended for children, because caffeine stops the body from absorbing calcium well. Caffeine is also a stimulant, which means it gives children artificial energy. These foods and drinks include coffee, tea, energy drinks and chocolate.

Healthy alternatives for snacks and desserts

Encourage your child to choose snacks from the healthy food groups. This can include things like nuts, cheese, low-fat yoghurt and fresh fruit or vegetables – for example, carrot and celery sticks with dips like hommus, guacamole or tzatziki (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/nutrition-fitness/cooking-with-kids/cooking-together-tzatziki>).

The same goes for **dessert** at the end of a meal. Sliced fruit or yoghurt are healthy options. If you want to serve something special, try homemade banana bread (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/nutrition-fitness/food-recipes/banana-bread>). Save the seriously sweet stuff, like cakes and chocolate, for special occasions like birthdays.



The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/media/external-links/a/australian-guide-to-healthy-eating>) says that both children and adults should avoid or limit sometimes foods. It's best to save these foods for special occasions.

References

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External links

- [Eat for Health – Healthy eating for children \(PDF: 3.35mb\)](https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/the_guidelines/n55f_children_brochure.pdf)
(https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/the_guidelines/n55f_children_brochure.pdf)

Last updated or reviewed

22-01-2021

SUPPORTED BY



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Raising Children Network is supported by the Australian Government. Member organisations are the Parenting Research Centre and the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute with The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health.

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