

A-Z GUIDE TO NUTRITION AND HYDRATION IN THE EARLY YEARS



A is for Appetite: Young children have an in-built ability to regulate their food intake based on their nutritional needs, and their appetite and food preferences are likely to vary from day to day. While you should offer them healthy foods and snacks in appropriate portion sizes, let them decide how much they eat. Pushing children to eat more than they want to or to ‘clear their plates’ can lead to them overriding their natural appetite regulation and could encourage over-eating.

B is for Bowel health: Young children have too little fibre in their diet, with children aged between 18 months old and three years old only getting 10g per day instead of the recommended 15g. Fibre helps move food through the digestive system and can help relieve and prevent constipation. Keeping little ones hydrated is also key to helping maintain healthy bowel movements, so try to ensure they are getting enough fluid. Constipation affects up to 30 percent of children and it is thought that the peak prevalence is during the pre-school years.

C is for Carbohydrates: one of the main sources of fuel for the body. Starchy carbohydrates are found in foods like potatoes, rice, pasta, bread and cereals. Young children should be offered some form of starchy carbohydrate at every meal. It’s a good idea to check the ingredients of breakfast cereals and to avoid those with a high sugar content. You could also go for toast with a healthy topping.

D is for Dairy. Milk, yoghurt and cheese provide valuable protein, B vitamins and minerals, particularly calcium that helps support healthy bones and teeth. If a child is over 2 years old and growing well it is fine to offer semi-skimmed milk and reduced fat yoghurts and cheeses.

E is for Early Years. A unique time in life when a child goes through a rapid period of growth and development, during which the right amount and type of nutrition is needed. That's why a toddler has different dietary needs to an adult. The Alliance's Nutrition Support Programme provides early years settings with support to help them get nutrition right during this critical period. Click [here](#) for more information.

F is for Fats, which are important as a source of energy for growing young children. Fats also have a key role in helping the body absorb certain vitamins. But it is important to get the balance right – foods like oily fish, dairy products, vegetable oils and spreads provide fats and important nutrients, whereas high fat foods like cakes, biscuits and fried snacks should be limited.

G is for Growth: Children in the early years grow rapidly but it is important that their growth stays within healthy boundaries. Currently one in five children in the UK starts school overweight or obese. If a young child is overweight, then the key is a healthy diet and plenty of activity.

H is for Hydration: The body of an infant is around 75% water, which decreases as a child grows and further decreases into adulthood – so it's very important to keep children hydrated. Don't leave it to them to tell you they're thirsty; offer them drinks regularly throughout the day. And remember, if they've been active and running around they need more.

I **is for Imagination**, which can play a big part in helping encourage young children to accept new foods. Using imagination in the way that foods are presented to a child, for example, can make a real difference. Encouraging food-related play and making the most of a child's imagination can also be a great way to get them to try new foods.

J **is for Juice:** Fruit juice provides nutrients but is high in sugar. If used as a drink for toddlers, it should be diluted and only given at meal times. It's still best to stick with water and milk as the main drinks for little ones, as too much fruit juice can increase the risk of damage to teeth and contribute to an excess of sugars and calories in the diet.

K **is for Knowledge**, and as we know, knowledge is power! What does a healthy diet really look like for pre-school children? Unravelling all the information out there and working out what the facts are is often the hardest part. Once you have the facts, providing young children with the right foods becomes that little bit easier. The Nutrition Support Programme is here to help you get the facts straight. Click [here](#).

L **is for Lunch**, which is often at nursery, pre-school or a childminder setting. If you're a parent or carer and have to provide the lunch, it can feel like a challenge to prepare a healthy balanced meal in a lunch box, and even more of a challenge to keep it varied and interesting! But rest assured it can be done. Click [here](#) for our guide.

M **is for Minerals**, which are only needed in very small amounts, but are just as essential to the body's healthy functioning as the other nutrient groups. Offering young children a varied diet made up of all food groups, and including a mixture of different coloured fruits and vegetables, will usually provide them with all the minerals and other nutrients they need.

N is for **Neophobia**, also known as food refusal or ‘fussy eating’, which is a normal phase that most children go through when they are a toddler. While this can cause great concern for parents and carers, it generally doesn’t harm the child who usually eats enough in total over a week or so to meet their needs and who is growing and developing well. It’s important to keep on offering them food but without pressure to eat it. However, in some cases food refusal can be more extreme and should be discussed with a healthcare professional.

O is for **Oily fish**, which should be regularly included in the diet of a young child as it contains omega-3, which is important for heart health and is also involved in brain development in infants. The omega-3 found in fish can only be made in very small amounts by the body, so most of it needs to come from the diet.

P is for **Protein**, which is very important for the healthy development of many structures and systems in the human body, from muscle, bones and skin to the brain and the immune system. Because the body is growing and developing rapidly in the early years, toddlers need to eat a larger proportion of protein compared to their weight, than adults.

Q is for **Quantity**: Providing young children with the right number and size portions of the different food groups is important in giving them the correct balance of nutrients and minerals to support their healthy growth and development.

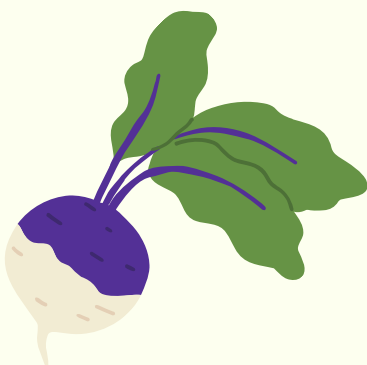
R is for **Repeat exposure**: Toddlers will often refuse new foods but this doesn’t mean that they’ll never like them! Offering young children a food at least 6-15 times over two to eight weeks, and maintaining a positive attitude while doing this, will help them accept it. And once it is accepted, continue offering the food, as with more exposure they may even learn to like it!

S is for Sugar: Young children have too much sugar in their diet – on average, the equivalent of eight cubes of added sugars a day, compared to the maximum recommended three to four. Sugar is added to many foods and drinks including things like yoghurts and fruit squash, so it's good to read the labels. Too much sugar can cause obesity and tooth decay among other health issues in children.

T is for Tooth decay: If children consume a lot of sugary foods and drinks, this can increase the risk of tooth decay. If you do give them sugary foods, try to limit how often you give them and time them alongside meals, when they're less likely to cause damage to their teeth. As for drinks, it's best to stick to plain milk and water – the only 'tooth-friendly' options.

U is for Undernutrition, the term used to describe when the body is not getting enough of the nutrients we need to be healthy. In extreme cases, this can lead to conditions such as scurvy and rickets. Because some foods and drinks can be high in calories without providing many vitamins or minerals, it is possible for a child to be overweight but still not get all the essential nutrients they need.

V is for Vitamins, of which there are thirteen. A varied diet should meet the vitamin needs of most toddlers. However, vitamin A, C and D supplements are recommended for children under five years of age. This is because growing children, especially those who don't eat a varied diet, sometimes don't get enough of vitamins A and C, and it is difficult to get enough vitamin D from the diet alone.



W is for **Water**: Tap water is free and one of the healthiest drinks for a child (and for an adult)! That makes drinking water a great habit to set in their early years. Water is hydrating, it's tooth-friendly and it has no calories – unlike many sugary drinks, which provide lots of calories but few nutrients. It's important for early educators and parents/carers alike to offer children water in between meal-times, to keep them hydrated throughout the day.

X is for **eXperimentation** with foods. Variety is the spice of life they say! Letting young children experiment with new tastes and offering them a wide variety of foods will increase their acceptance of foods and importantly increases the chances of them receiving all the nutrients they need for healthy growth and development.

Y is for **You!** Whether you are a parent/carer or an early educator, when you are eating with children or interacting with food in front of children, you are setting an example, so try to set a good one! The eating habits and preferences developed in the early years form the foundations for the rest of their lives.

Z is for **Zucchini** (otherwise known as courgettes), one of so many vegetables that you can offer young children to help them accept and enjoy vegetables setting a great habit for life. Vegetables are a great source of vitamins, minerals and fibre. While it's common for toddlers to start rejecting foods, particularly vegetables with bitter tastes, there are ways to help overcome this. [Click here.](#)

