

# How Do I Know if My Child Is Eating a Healthful Diet?



Parents and caregivers often wonder if their child is getting everything he/she needs to optimize growth and development. Children may seem like they are “not eating anything,” “eating only junk food,” and “eating the same things every day.” Though children are resilient and are probably eating better than it appears, it can make caring for your child less stressful if you know what to look for in determining if your child is eating a healthful (enough) diet.

Your child’s pediatrician has a list of markers that are used during well visits. Growth charts are used to assess nutritional status, weight, and development. Besides anthropometry, pediatricians look at biochemical markers and lab values, and gather dietary information to interpret nutritional status. A determination of overweight or underweight, or understanding your child’s growth curves may shed light into your child’s dietary intake. You should bring your concerns about your child’s diet to your pediatrician and expect that your pediatrician will share thoughts if he/she thinks your child’s growth is affected by nutrition.

Knowing what signs and symptoms display malnutrition may help alleviate some of the stress in wondering if your child is eating well. Well-nourished children should have shiny hair that does not fall out, appear brittle, or dry. Their eyes should look bright and clear; under their eyelids should appear pink or red. Well-nourished children have skin that is smooth, firm, and of good color, while skin of undernourished children looks off in color, scaly, flaky, or cracked. If your child is eating well, his/her lips should appear smooth with good color; a malnourished child may display red or swollen lips, with cracking in the corners of the mouth.

Fingernails should appear firm and pink, not spoon-shaped, brittle, or ridged. Well-nourished children show good muscle tone, healthy posture, and long straight bones. Undernourished children may have a wasted appearance of muscles, swollen bumps on the skull or ends of bones, and bowed legs or knock-knees. Malnourished children also may appear overweight or obese.

## **A child is eating a healthful diet if he/she consumes:**

- A variety of foods
- Fruits and vegetables that are colorful
- Calcium-rich foods, such as milk, yogurt, broccoli, and almonds
- Meals and snacks every 3-5 hours while awake
- Protein-rich foods, such as eggs, meat, fish, beans, chicken, or tofu
- Water in place of sugary juices and sodas
- Foods that are iron-rich, such as meats, beans, and leafy green vegetables
- Enriched breads, grains, and cereals

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**Your child should not use food to deal with emotions. The following are common concerns and suggested solutions to feeding concerns:**

- Child refuses meat
  - Offer small servings of meat, poultry, or fish
  - Incorporate small amounts of these foods in casseroles, pizzas, and soups
  - Choose beans, eggs, and cheese as alternatives
- Child drinks too little milk
  - Offer cheese and yogurt
  - Add milk to soups, hot cereals, and puddings
  - Use powdered milk for baking
- Child drinks too much milk
  - Offer water between meals and if your child is thirsty
  - Serve milk at the end of the meal and limit it to two times a day
- Child refuses fruits and vegetables
  - Offer more of the preferred fruits and vegetables
  - Serve vegetables raw, with a healthful dip
  - Slice fruits so they are easy to eat
  - Try dried fruits
  - Put vegetables in soups and meals so that they cannot be picked out
  - Continue to offer fruits and vegetables at every meal and snack
- Child eats too many sweets
  - Do not keep sweets or treats in the house
  - Do not use sweets as a reward or bribe
  - Make sure all caregivers are on the same page.

## References

Mitchell M. Nutrition Across the Life Span. Philadelphia, PA: WB Saunders Company; 1997.