

# Healthy eating for 1 to 4 year olds



The Children's Food Pyramid Guidelines

**Good eating habits started early can last a lifetime. If your child eats the right amount from the wide variety of foods on the Children's Food Pyramid, it can help them to:**

- **grow**
- **learn**
- **play.**

The amount of food a young child eats changes every day and at every meal depending on their needs. Taller, older children and children who are more active will eat more. It is important to use your child's appetite to help you decide how much food to offer them. This Department of Health leaflet is a guide to how much food to offer:

- 1 and 2 year old children
- 3 and 4 year old children.

These guidelines have been developed by nutrition experts in Ireland and are based on Irish and international evidence.



Children aged 1 to 4 years old have small tummies but they have high nutritional needs. They grow and develop quickly and need nourishing food to give them energy, protein and other nutrients.

#### Healthy eating habits can last a lifetime

This age is the perfect age to teach your child healthy eating habits for life. Lead by example. If you eat a variety of healthy food your child will be more likely to do the same.



#### Small tummies need small servings

1 to 4 year old children have small tummies. They can only eat small amounts. Offer them 3 meals and 2 to 3 healthy snacks every day. All their food and drink needs to be nourishing.



#### Portion size matters

Be guided by your child's appetite. Use it to help you decide how much food to offer them. Follow the Children's Food Pyramid guide to servings for portion sizes.



#### Limit 'treat' foods

Foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt can be linked to being overweight in childhood. If you decide to give your child these foods offer them in TINY amounts and only once a week.



#### Offer water and milk as drinks

Avoid sugary drinks like some cordials and fizzy drinks. Sugary drinks are not good for your child's teeth.



#### Milk is a key food

Milk is a key food in the diets of 1 to 4 year old children. Offer your child three servings of milk, yogurt or cheese every day.



#### Have a regular daily routine

Having regular times for meals and snacks sets up healthy eating habits for life. Start every day with a healthy breakfast



#### More vitamin D needed in winter months

Young children don't get enough vitamin D in winter. They need to take 5 micrograms (5µg) vitamin D only drops or liquid every day from Halloween (31<sup>st</sup> October) to St Patrick's Day (17<sup>th</sup> March).



#### Make sure your child gets enough iron

Offer your child red meat three times a week and choose breakfast cereals with added iron (12mg/100g) most days of the week. 1 to 3 year olds who are small for their age may need extra iron so talk to a health professional for advice.

## Size matters

Keep it simple and make one meal for all the family. It's really important to use child-size plates and bowls to offer your child a child-size portion of food.

The recommended plate size is a:

- child's plate, or
- side plate.

The recommended bowl is a:

- child's bowl, or
- small bowl.

See measurements below.

Child-size cutlery makes it easier for your child to feed themselves.



20cm  
Child or side plate



26cm  
Adult's plate



11cm  
Child's bowl



16cm  
Adult's bowl



Child  
Beaker, glass or cup with 100ml milk



Adult  
Glass with 200ml milk

Child's portion	Adult's portion	Child's portion	Adult's portion
 30g cooked chicken	 50-75g cooked chicken	 Wheat biscuits	 Wheat biscuits
 2x100ml milk	 200ml milk	 Baked beans on toast	 Baked beans on toast
 1/2 banana	 1 banana	 Chicken, potato, carrots and green beans	 Chicken, potato, carrots and green beans
 1/2 pitta pocket	 1 pitta pocket	 Beef stir-fry	 Beef stir-fry

## Drinks

Water is the best drink.  
Offer 6–8 drinks every day.



### From beaker to cup and glass

Between 1 and 2 years of age, your child can move on from using a beaker with a lid. They can change to:

- using a beaker without a lid
- a glass
- a cup.



### Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is recommended in Ireland until children are 2 years of age or beyond.



### Tooth-friendly drinks

Milk and water are the most tooth-friendly drinks.

Limit sugar-containing fizzy drinks and cordials. If offered at all, make sure it's with meals.



The Children's Food Pyramid has six shelves. Each shelf shows:

- a variety of foods
- child-size servings.

It is important to offer your child the number of servings suitable for their age.



Note: The Children's Food Pyramid above shows examples of foods on each food shelf. It does not represent the amount of food a 1 to 4 year old child should eat every day.



### Be active

From 2 years old children need to be active for at least one hour every day.



### Drinks

Water, breastmilk and milk are the drinks recommended for your children.

### Foods and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt

Maximum once a week and in TINY amounts

#### Fats, spreads and oils

#### Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts

#### Milk, yogurt and cheese

#### Vegetables, salad and fruit

#### Cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice



**Ages one and two**

**Ages three and four**

**In very small amounts**

**In very small amounts**

**2 Servings a day**

**3-4 Servings a day**

**3 Servings a day**

**3 Servings a day**

**2-3 Servings a day**

**4-5 Servings a day**

**3-4 Servings a day**

**4-6 Servings a day**



### Vitamin D

Young children aged 1 to 4 need to take 5 micrograms (5µg) vitamin D only drops or liquid in the winter months.



### Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is recommended in Ireland until children are 2 years of age or beyond.

# Cereals, breads, potatoes, pasta and rice



Children need more of these foods for energy and growth – that is why they are the biggest shelf on the Children’s Food Pyramid. These starchy foods provide fibre and some B vitamins which are needed to convert food into energy. Offer at least one of these foods at every meal.



## Healthy eating habits

Offer your child a breakfast cereal with added iron most days of the week. This is especially important for younger children.

Standard porridge is a healthy breakfast food but children aged 1 to 4 will benefit from a porridge with added iron.

Check the label and choose cereals and porridge that contain at least 12mg of iron per 100g.

Limit the amount of sugar coated and chocolate coated breakfast cereals you offer your child.

Young children can meet their fibre needs by having a mix of white and wholemeal cereals and breads.

Offering all wholemeal or wholegrain choices may be too filling and reduce your child’s appetite for other nourishing foods.

If your child is prone to constipation, offer more wholemeal and wholegrain varieties. Make sure they eat vegetables and drink enough fluid.

## Servings

**1 and 2 year olds**  
**3 or 4 servings a day**

**3 and 4 year olds**  
**4 to 6 servings a day**

### Serving guide

Adjust these servings to suit your child.

Smaller, younger children will eat less.

Taller, older and more active children will eat more.

## Each of these examples shows one serving



**1/2 cup (30g)**  
flaked cereal  
fortified with iron



**1-1 1/2** wheat  
biscuits



**1** plain rice cake



**1-2** crackers



**1/2-1** slice bread



**1/2-1** small roll



**1/2** pitta pocket



**1/2** small wrap



**1/2** chapatti



**1** unsalted  
breadstick



**1/2-1** small cooked  
potato



**1/2 cup (30-40g)**  
cooked sweet  
potato or yam



**1/2 cup (30-40g)**  
cooked pasta



**1/2 cup (30-40g)**  
cooked rice

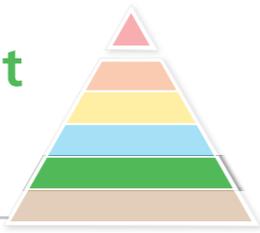


**1/2 cup (30-40g)**  
cooked noodles



**1/2 cup (30-40g)**  
cooked couscous

# Vegetables, salad and fruit



These foods provide vitamins, minerals and fibre.  
At every meal, and as snacks, offer your child fresh vegetables, salad or fruit chopped into small servings.



## Healthy eating habits

Offer your child different coloured vegetables, salad and fruit. Try to include:

- green
- yellow
- orange
- red
- purple.

This will allow them to enjoy the variety of vitamins and minerals.

Orange juice is rich in vitamin C. When your child drinks unsweetened orange juice and eats an iron-containing breakfast cereal, it helps them absorb iron. Iron is an important nutrient for young children.

Other good sources of vitamin C are:

- berries
- oranges
- kiwis
- red peppers.

You can add chopped berries to breakfast cereal.

Limit dried food to once a week because it:

- contains sugar
- is sticky
- is not kind to teeth.

## Servings

**1 and 2 year olds**

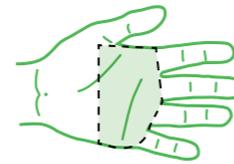
**2 or 3 servings a day**

**3 and 4 year olds**

**4 or 5 servings a day**

### Serving guide

An average serving size is about 40g. A serving size that fits into half the palm of your hand is about right for children aged 1 to 4.



Adjust these servings to suit your child – some children will take a little more and others a little less.

## Each of these examples shows one serving



1 plum



1 kiwi



1 mandarin



100ml unsweetened orange juice



½ orange



½ apple



½ pear



½ banana



3-4 cooked carrot sticks



3-4 cucumber sticks



5-6 berries cut in halves or quarters



5-6 grapes cut in quarters



3-4 cherry tomatoes cut in quarters



½ cup (30-40g) tinned fruit in natural juice

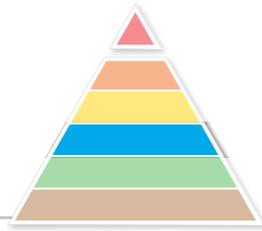


½ cup (30-40g) cooked, fresh or frozen vegetables



100ml homemade or readymade vegetable soup

# Milk, yogurt and cheese



These foods provide calcium for healthy bones and teeth. Offering milk as a drink with meals is an easy way to give your child one of the three daily servings they need.



## Healthy eating habits

Milk is a key food for 1 to 4 year old children.

Continue to provide breastmilk up to 2 years of age or beyond.

Offer full-fat milk to children aged 1 to 2 years.

You can offer low-fat milk to children aged 3 to 4 years.

Skimmed milk is not suitable for children under 5 years of age.

You can offer non-dairy soya 'milks' if your child is allergic to cow's milk. These should be unsweetened and fortified with calcium.

Almond milk, coconut milk, rice milks and other plant-based milks are not suitable for young children.

Your child can be given infant formula up to one year old and after that age they can have full-fat cow's milk.

You can offer your child small pots (47g) of plain or natural fromage frais with meals or between meals.

## Servings

1 and 2 year olds

3 servings a day

3 and 4 year olds

3 servings a day

Breastmilk counts towards these servings.

Breastfeeding mothers can add cow's milk to their child's cereal or offer cow's milk as a drink.

It is important to include yogurt and cheese also to help meet your child's nutritional needs.



Each of these examples shows one serving



200ml or 2x100ml plain milk or milk with added vitamins



200ml or 2x100ml unsweetened soya 'milk' fortified with calcium



2 adult thumbs of cheese



1 pot (125g) plain yogurt



2 small pots (47g) plain or natural fromage frais



Homemade custard or rice pudding made with 200ml of milk

Servings can be split during the day between a meal and a snack. 1 serving can combine two foods or drinks.

For example, 1 serving could be 100ml of milk with 1 small pot fromage frais or 1 thumb of cheese.

Your child can start drinking from a cup or a beaker when they are between 1 and 2 years old.



# Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans or nuts



These foods provide protein and iron for growth and development. Red meat such as beef, lamb and pork contain iron. Offer them 3 times a week.



## Healthy eating habits

Offer meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans or nuts to your child at each of their 2 main meals every day.

Oily fish have omega 3 and vitamin D including:

- mackerel
- herring
- salmon
- trout
- sardines.

These are good for brain and eye development so offer them once a week.

You should limit processed meat like ham or bacon to once a week and only give **small amounts**.

Offer your child smooth nut butter without added sugar and salt. Whole nuts should not be given to children under 5 because of the risk of choking.

Good vegetarian protein sources include:

- eggs
- soya products
- peas
- chickpeas
- beans
- nuts
- seeds.

Protein is not a problem for vegetarian diets but iron can be. Consult a registered dietitian for advice.

Foods from the milk, yogurt and cheese shelf also provide protein.

Chicken nuggets, sausages and burgers have less protein and are high in fat and salt. **They should not be a regular part of your child's diet.**

## Servings

**1 and 2 year olds**

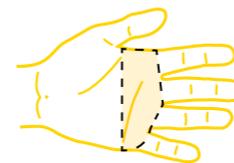
**2 servings a day**

**3 and 4 year olds**

**3 or 4 servings a day**

### Serving Guide

An average serving size of cooked beef, lamb, pork, chicken, turkey or fish is about 30g. A serving size that fits into one third the palm of your hand is about right for children aged 1 to 4.



Each of these examples shows one serving



**30g** cooked beef



**30g** cooked lamb



**30g** cooked chicken or turkey



**30g** cooked salmon



**1/4 cup (40g)** baked beans



**1/4 cup (40g)** lentils



**1/4 cup (40g)** peas



**1/4 cup (40g)** chickpeas



**35g** hummus



**35g** cooked portion tofu



**2** falafels



**1** medium egg



**1 heaped teaspoon** smooth peanut or nut butter

## Fats, spreads and oils



Fats, spreads and oils provide essential fats in your child's diet. Only use very small amounts of these foods.

### What is a small amount?

- 1 teaspoon of spread on bread
- ½ teaspoon oil in cooking.



## Healthy eating habits

Frying food is not recommended for young children.

Choose mono or poly-unsaturated spreads. Choose rapeseed, olive, canola, sunflower or corn oils.

Limit mayonnaise, coleslaw and salad dressings as they also contain oil.

Always cook with as little fat or oil as possible.

Try to:

- grill
- oven-bake
- steam
- boil
- stir-fry.

## The red triangle at the top of the Children's Food Pyramid



The red triangle at the top of the Children's Food Pyramid contains food and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt. These are NOT needed for health or for keeping children at a healthy weight.

Sweets, chocolate, biscuits, cakes, fizzy drinks or crisps should not be a part of your child's everyday diet. Having foods and drinks from this shelf spoils your child's appetite for more nutritious food. If you decide to give your child these foods offer them in TINY amounts and only once a week.

### What is a TINY amount?

- 1 square of chocolate
- 3 crisps
- Half plain biscuit
- 3 soft sweets



## Healthy Eating Habits

While it's best not to offer these foods and drinks to children aged 1 to 4 years old at all, you may give tiny amounts occasionally.

Sugary foods and drinks are not good for your child's teeth.

Frozen pizza can be high in fat so limit it to a very small slice once a week.

Frozen foods like chicken nuggets, burgers or chips can be high in fat and salt and should be limited to small amounts once a week.

Takeaways can be high in fat and salt and should not be part of your child's diet.

 Maximum once a week in TINY amounts.

These foods can be linked to childhood obesity.

## Healthy snacks

Healthy snacks are a very important part of the diet of young children and may be offered 2 to 3 times each day. Here are some healthy snack ideas – for at home or on the go.

### Light snacks for between meals



Small pieces of fruit



Small pot of yogurt



Sliced cucumber sticks



Breastfeed or glass of milk



Sliced, hard-boiled egg



1-2 crackers



1-2 breadsticks



1 plain rice cake

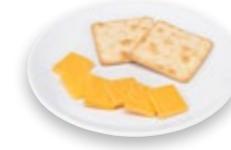
**Snack right!**

Limit dried fruit to once a week because dried fruit contains sugar, is sticky and is not kind to teeth.

Custards and rice puddings also contain calcium and can be offered a few times a week.

Some days your child may be hungrier than others and need filling healthy snacks between meals. Readymade bars aimed at this age group can be high in sugar. It is always best to choose unprocessed snacks.

### Filling healthy snacks for between meals



Cheese with 2 crackers



½ bagel with lightly spread peanut butter



2 breadsticks with hummus



Small slice of fruit loaf



Slice of toast with mashed or chopped banana



Small bowl of breakfast cereal and milk



½ wholemeal scone with spread



Small bowl homemade or readymade soup

Offer vegetables, salad or fruit as snacks.

Offer your child smooth nut butter **without** added sugar and salt.

Try not to use foods high in fat, sugar or salt as a reward or to comfort your child.

## The importance of breakfast

Try to make sure your child eats breakfast every day. It gives children the energy they need for a healthy start.



Lead by example and make sure you eat a breakfast too and sit down with your child for breakfast as often as possible.



### Check the label

Offer an iron-fortified breakfast cereal **most days of the week** – check the label and look for cereals containing **at least 12mg of iron per 100g**.

## Tips for healthy eating every day

Routine is important to establish healthy habits. These tips provide practical advice for everyday life.



### Shopping



Encourage children to get involved with shopping and planning meals.



Make changes as a family. For example, involve your children in choosing different fruits for snacks.



Buy very little unhealthy snack foods like biscuits, chocolate and sweets.

### Throughout the day



Make healthy food choices easily available – keep chopped vegetables and fruit in the fridge or a bowl of fruit on the table for older children.



Offer vegetables or fruit as the snack of choice.



Use rewards like stickers or a colouring book instead of food treats. Or do a fun activity together like a game, a bike ride, a trip to the playground or park.

### Food and drink



Base your child's meals and snacks on fresh food where possible.



Introduce new foods one at a time. Persist with changes, it may take several times to succeed.



Let your child help you with preparing meals, it might encourage them to eat what they've made.



Choose water and milk as your child's main drink. Tea is not a suitable drink for young children.



### Vitamin D

For healthy bones and teeth, make sure your child has a vitamin D only supplement every day from Halloween (31<sup>st</sup> October) to St Patrick's Day (17<sup>th</sup> March). This is new advice from the Department of Health. Choose a supplement from your pharmacist that provides 5 micrograms (5µg) vitamin D. Drops or liquid are suitable for 1 to 4 year old children.

## Sample meal plan for a 1 year old child

It is important to offer your child a variety of foods. The sample meal plan on this page shows the variety and amount of food and drink you can offer your 1 year old child every day.



### Breakfast

**1 cup (200ml)** milk for cereal and to drink

**½ mandarin** in segments

**2 tablespoons (30g)** iron fortified wheat flakes



### Lunch

**15g** cheddar cheese

**2 tablespoons (30g)** tomato pasta sauce

**3 tablespoons (40g)** cooked macaroni pasta



### Dinner

**30g** chopped chicken

**30g** mix of carrots and green beans

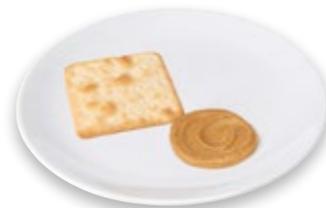
**½ scoop** mashed potato

**1** fromage frais



### Mid-morning snack

**1** fromage frais



### Mid-afternoon snack

**1 teaspoon (12g)** peanut butter

**1** cracker



### Evening snack

**100ml** milk or breastmilk

## Sample meal plan for a 3 year old child

The sample meal plan on this page shows the variety and amount of food and drink you can offer your 3 year old child every day. For more sample meal plans visit [www.gov.ie/healthyireland](http://www.gov.ie/healthyireland)



### Breakfast

**1** egg

**100ml** unsweetened orange juice (to improve iron uptake)

**1 slice** wholemeal bread toasted with 5g spread



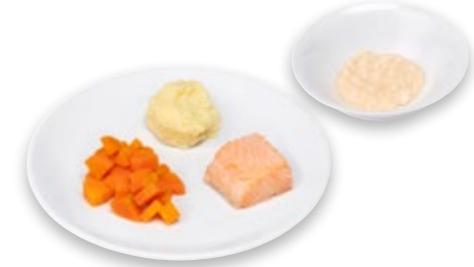
### Lunch

**1** falafel

**¼ tub (35g)** hummus

**3-4** cherry tomatoes, cut in quarters

**½** small wrap



### Dinner

**30g** salmon

**½ cup (30g)** carrots

**1 scoop** mashed potato

**25g** rice pudding made with 100ml milk



### Mid-morning snack

**1 small pot (47g)** fromage frais

**5-6** raspberries, cut in half



### Mid-afternoon snack

**25g** cheese

**1** rice cake



### Evening snack

**100ml** milk

**½ slice (30g)** banana bread

# Help for every day

You'll find information, tips and meal plans on [www.gov.ie/healthyireland](http://www.gov.ie/healthyireland)



## Meal plans

Daily meal plans for children aged 1 to 4.



## Fact sheets

Fact sheets for every food shelf, providing serving guides and tips for healthy eating.



## Guides

Helpful guides on:

- Happy Healthy Mealtimes
- Fussy Eaters
- Breakfast
- Portions
- Vitamin D

At the HSE's [mychild.ie](http://mychild.ie) and in the free My Child books, you'll find the answers you need from:

- doctors
- public health nurses
- midwives
- dietitians, and
- lots of other experts.

It's there to help parents with every step from pregnancy and through the first few years of your child's life.

This includes:

- health
- symptoms
- medical conditions
- development
- everyday care
- child safety
- parenting advice,
- and much more.

You'll find information about the topics in this booklet at [www.mychild.ie/nutrition](http://www.mychild.ie/nutrition)



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

# How to **START** making healthy changes



Everyday life often gets in the way of making healthy changes. It's not about being perfect. It's about starting with a change, sticking with it and getting a small daily win. **The good habits that our children learn in the home will stay with them for life.**

Making small changes to your child's diet and play could make big differences in their future health. If you're regularly active and eating healthy, it's also more likely that your child will be too.

**The START campaign provides advice on:**

- healthy snacks
- treats
- menu planning

It also provides a selection of recipes – see [www.makeastart.ie](http://www.makeastart.ie)