



Kids and Healthy Snacking—They Go Together

This time of year, family schedules get more hectic! School is back in session. After-school activities are lined up. Homework needs attention. But the kids are hungry. Avoid some of this stress by planning for snack attacks.

Children need healthy snacks. They are growing and developing rapidly. They have small stomachs that empty quickly. Active kids need energy and nutrients to refuel their bodies several times a day. This translates to three regular daily meals plus two to three small snacks. Snacks should be scheduled about two hours before the next main meal.

Most kids get approximately 25 percent of their daily calories from snacks.⁽¹⁾ These mini-meals are great ways to fill in nutritional gaps and make up for foods and nutrients that were missed at mealtime.

Snacking has become a way of life for busy people. We all know how easy it is easy to grab high-fat sweets, fried salty foods, candy and sugary drinks. But we end up with empty calories and little nourishment. Forget mindless munching and gulping. If these snacks are eaten frequently, our weight and our health are affected.

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Snacks can bring kids of all ages a big boost in daily nutrition if the snacks are *nutrient-dense*. Smart snack strategies mean choosing foods from the five groups found on the Food Guide Pyramid.⁽²⁾ They are (1) nutrient-rich grains, (2) crisp vegetables, (3) colorful fruits, (4) low-fat dairy products and (5) lean meat, beans or nuts. Healthy and satisfying snacks can be made by combining foods from at least two of the five food groups.

Stumped for ideas on how to fix nutritious snacks that kids will actually eat? Here are some tasty favorites for kids who can chew and swallow well:

- snack mixes made with whole grain cereal, dried fruit and popcorn
- raw veggies with low-fat dip
- celery sticks filled with peanut butter
- fresh fruit cut into fun shapes
- low-fat yogurt with fruit and granola topping
- string cheese rolled in a lean deli-meat slice
- peanut butter on whole grain crackers

For more kid-friendly ideas, go to <http://www.mealsmatter.org/cookingforfamily/planning/> and select "Healthy Snacks for School-Age Kids."

Keep snack time fun by encouraging kids to help whenever possible. This creates a positive experience. They like to eat foods they have picked out at the store and fixed at home.

Enlist everyone's help. Very young ones can help wash and scrub vegetables, name and count foods, pull stems from grapes, identify fruit and vegetable colors and mix dry ingredients together. School-age kids can help measure and mix ingredients, open packages, pour cereal and spread toppings on crackers, bread and veggies.

For snacks that will be eaten at another time, pre-portion them in small individual containers or plastic bags. This way each person has his or her own container. Another benefit is portion sizes and calories are kept in check.

Also, set aside a "snack place" in the refrigerator and cupboard. This way everyone knows where to go for nutritious grab-and-go snacks.

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Smart snacking promotes good health by supplying important nutrients without adding too many calories. By teaching your children to choose and enjoy healthy choices today, you are setting the stage for a lifetime of healthy eating habits.

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References:

⁽¹⁾ "Snacking Done Right" by Rallie McAllister, MD. Updated February 19, 2004. Web site: <http://www.keepkidshealthy.com/nutrition/snacking.html>. Accessed April 24, 2006.

⁽²⁾ United States Department of Agriculture: "Inside the Pyramid." Web site: <http://www.mypyramid.gov/pyramid/index.html>. Accessed April 27, 2006.

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