



10  
STEPS  
FOR

# Healthy Toddlers

# Introducing the Ten Steps for Healthy Toddlers

Toddlers need a varied, balanced diet to thrive. But healthy eating at this age isn't just important for growth and development. Toddlers learn to like the food that their parents offer them. The food preferences they develop can help shape the eating habits they adopt when they start to make their own food choices. And good eating habits in later life can prevent serious health problems, including obesity, heart disease, diabetes and cancer.

It is for these reasons that improving the diet of toddlers should be considered a public health priority. Yet the guidance on what to feed one to four year olds is not always clear.

With many parents in full- or part-time employment, the responsibility for what their children eat does not rest with just one person. Playgroup, preschool and nursery staff, alongside grandparents and other childminders, all share a key role in caring for toddlers. It is important that everyone realises that wherever toddlers are fed, those involved have a role to play in bringing about positive improvements in their diets. In order to embrace this role they need to have clear and practical guidance on exactly how they can do this, what foods to offer and what behaviours to instil.

As a group of paediatricians, dietitians, health visitors and psychologists who work together on child nutrition issues, we set out to review the existing evidence on toddler nutrition and produce a set of simple messages, that are both aligned with, and complement, current government advice. Our aim is to help parents, carers and healthcare professionals approach feeding toddlers with confidence.

This document introduces *Ten Steps for Healthy Toddlers*, which provides consistent, simple and sound advice that can be applied everywhere toddlers are fed. This advice will help parents and carers cater for toddlers' nutritional needs and provide a positive experience of family mealtimes, while managing attitudes to food, activity and rest.

We are pleased to have worked with the Pre-school Learning Alliance in the development of this document and in addition have collaborated with many healthcare professional bodies and

expert medical reviewers. We will continue working with partners to ensure the widest dissemination to parents, carers and healthcare professionals.

By following the *Ten Steps*, carers and parents will be giving toddlers a good start in life.



**ATUL SINGHAL**  
Chairman of the Infant & Toddler Forum



## How to use Ten Steps for Healthy Toddlers

*Ten Steps for Healthy Toddlers* has been produced for anyone who looks after toddlers. It is designed to help parents, childminders and nursery staff, manage toddler mealtimes and eating behaviour with confidence.

They are available online to download and can be ordered as a poster and flyer. Visit [www.infantandtoddlerforum.org](http://www.infantandtoddlerforum.org) to order or download your copy now.

# Ten Steps in the right direction - a rationale

It is a worrying fact that many toddlers in the UK today aren't getting certain nutrients that they need. Iron deficiency anaemia still affects many toddlers and the cause in the vast majority of cases is poor diet.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Few toddlers are given the recommended vitamin D supplement.<sup>2,3</sup>

But while toddlers aren't eating enough of some foods, they are eating too much of others. Data shows that 13 per cent of two to four year olds are now obese, while a further 16 per cent are overweight.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, most of the excess weight gained before the child reaches school age is retained as excess weight during childhood. According to one study of the excess weight gained by nine years of age, 91 per cent in girls and 70 per cent in boys was gained by the age of five years.<sup>5</sup>

Although there have been several national health policies aimed, in part, at the under-5s, according to the 2010 Audit Commission paper 'Giving children a healthy start - a health report', dedicated funding has not produced any widespread improvements in the health of preschool children.<sup>6</sup> In addition, concerns about the quality of food given to toddlers in some of England's nurseries have been raised in a School Food Trust report.<sup>7</sup>

The Healthy Child Programme two year review aims to optimise child development and emotional wellbeing and reduce inequalities in outcome. A key outcome for health and child care professionals is the prevention of obesity and the promotion of health-enhancing behaviours for every child, such as eating a well-balanced diet, being active for at least three hours each day and having an appropriate weight for their height and general health.

However, despite its importance, toddler nutrition is a subject that is often overlooked in healthcare professional training. In an Infant & Toddler Forum survey, 62 per cent of healthcare professionals said they would like clearer guidance on what makes up a healthy diet for toddlers.<sup>8</sup>

No single intervention will be sufficient to improve toddlers' diets. What is needed is a concerted effort that focuses on all the settings in which toddlers are cared for.

*Ten Steps for Healthy Toddlers* aims to support parents and carers by providing a simple, shared guide that can be adopted by all and improve the consistency of mealtimes for toddlers in every setting.

A survey from the Infant & Toddler Forum shows that British parents rely on a complex support network – including nurseries, childminders, grandparents and extended family – all of whom play an important role in feeding their toddlers.<sup>9</sup>

- The average toddler typically has almost 30 per cent of their meals provided by people other than their parents.
- Grandparents, nurseries and childminders all play an important role in feeding toddlers with one in five families saying nurseries and childminders and one in four saying grandparents are involved in a typical week.
- Parents are often anxious that those who look after their toddlers are not providing healthy food choices with over one third of parents concerned that their toddlers may not be getting healthy, balanced meals. Of these, 50 per cent say that their toddlers are given too many treats.
- Over one third of parents are confused about or unaware of how toddlers' nutritional needs differ from those of adults and 77 per cent say that they have never received clear advice about portion sizes for toddlers.



**62%**

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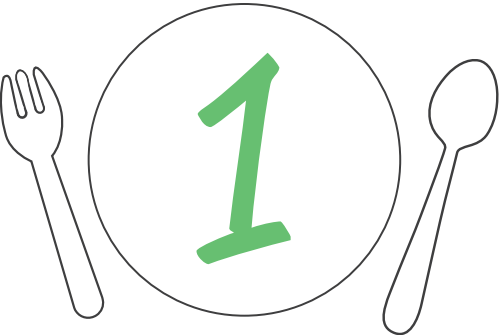


# Good habits for health, growth and development

The toddler years (1–4 years) are a time of rapid change. After your child’s first birthday he or she may:

- Show some food preferences – this might be for different textures, tastes and colours.
  - Like to feed himself or herself and be more independent.
  - Show sudden changes in likes and dislikes.
  - Refuse to try new foods – this usually decreases as toddlers approach school age.
- Try these ten steps for a healthy balance.

## Try these ten steps for a healthy balance:



### Eat together as a family and make mealtimes relaxed, happy occasions

**Make food easy to eat – finger foods are good. Eat the foods that you would like your toddler to eat. Praise your toddler when he or she eats well or tries something new – toddlers take time to learn to like new foods.**

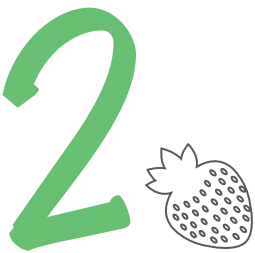


Eating together as a family is an important social time in family life as well as a learning opportunity for toddlers. They learn to eat different foods and improve their self feeding skills by watching what, and how, other members in the family or social group eat.

Refusing to eat new or unfamiliar foods is a normal developmental stage that is particularly evident in some toddlers.

When eating in social groups they learn that foods they may be reluctant to eat are eaten and enjoyed by other people. In time, with praise and encouragement, they will gradually begin to taste and learn to like the tastes and textures of a wider variety of nutritious foods.

So, by eating a healthy balanced diet of nutritious foods with their toddlers, parents will be encouraging their toddlers to like and enjoy those same nutritious foods, building an excellent foundation for future food choices.



### You decide which nutritious foods to offer but let your toddler decide how much to eat

**Never insist your toddler eats everything on his or her plate.**

Toddlers’ appetites vary, they may eat well at some meals but much less at others. If parents always offer nutritious foods at meals and snacks, when toddlers do eat well they will be getting lots of nutrients.

Parents often overestimate the quantity of food their toddler needs and some



coerce their toddler to eat more when they may no longer be hungry. Parents often need support to allow their toddler to eat the amount the toddler’s appetite demands rather than how much the parent would like them to eat

Toddlers who eat more than they need are more likely to become overweight.



### Offer foods from all five food groups each day

**Together they give the right mix of nutrients (see portion sizes on page 11).**

Each of the five food groups listed on page 11 supplies a different combination of nutrients. Eating from all five food groups provides toddlers with a balanced nutritious and enjoyable diet.<sup>10,11</sup>

The five food groups are bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods; fruit and vegetables; milk, cheese and yogurt; meat, fish, eggs, nuts and pulses; oils, butter and fat spreads.

Sugary foods should be eaten in smaller and limited quantities as these foods provide energy, but fewer nutrients.

Inclusion of small quantities of fat and sugar usually improves flavour making meals more pleasurable occasions.



Eating from all five food groups provides toddlers with a balanced nutritious and enjoyable diet.





## Have a routine and offer 3 meals and 2–3 snacks each day

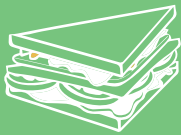
**Offer 2 courses at each meal and only offer nutritious snacks. Don't allow grazing on food.**

Toddlers need to eat regularly throughout the day to maintain their energy levels. However toddlers who graze on snack foods without a routine usually eat a less nutritious diet and are more likely to suffer dental caries. A routine of 3 meals and 2–3 planned nutritious snacks ensures a more balanced diet and limits the number of times that teeth are exposed to sugar and acid in food and drinks.

Toddlers can become bored with the first savoury course at a meal but still be interested in eating a second course of different foods. By offering two courses of different foods at meals, toddlers will be eating a wider variety of nutrients. The first savoury course may be starchy foods with vegetables and meat, fish or pulses. The second course should be fruit or a small pudding with nutritious ingredients such as fruit, milk, yogurt, rice, flour or eggs.

Toddlers are unlikely to eat all the nutrients they need each day in only 3 meals and therefore need nutritious snacks of food combinations from the food groups such as:

- Slices of fruit and vegetable sticks
- Small sandwich with cherry tomatoes or vegetable sticks
- Peanut butter and banana sandwich
- Slices of apple spread with cream cheese
- Pancakes spread with fruit purée
- Breadsticks or crackers with cubes of cheese and celery sticks
- Pitta bread with hummus and fruit slices
- Muffin with fruit pieces
- Toasted crumpet with butter
- Scone with butter
- Yogurt or fromage frais and fruit slices
- Small piece fruit cake
- Small slice of pizza
- Small bowl breakfast cereal with fruit slices and milk
- Toast with peanut butter or butter and marmite
- Hot cross buns or tea bread.



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## Offer 6–8 drinks a day

**Give all drinks in a beaker or cup –not bottles. 3–4oz or 100–120ml is about right. Water is a good choice.**

Toddlers need to drink adequate fluids to maintain hydration and prevent constipation. They should be offered a drink with each meal and snack. They

may need more drinks in hot weather or when they are particularly active.

Bottles should be discontinued by about 12 months of age because toddlers who carry on drinking from bottles often begin to use them as a comfort. Sucking slowly on large drinks of juice or other sweet fluids, bathes teeth for a longer time in the sugar, rendering teeth more vulnerable to caries.

All drinks offered, including milk, should be about 100–120ml. Toddlers who continue with large drinks of milk from bottles or beakers are more likely to become iron deficient. Large volumes of milk will reduce their appetite for other foods that are higher in iron. Iron deficiency anaemia affects about one in eight toddlers in the UK causing tiredness, lethargy and delayed development.<sup>1,2,3</sup>



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## Give vitamin D every day

**Toddlers don't get enough in their food and need 10 micrograms in a supplement each day.**

Even toddlers eating nutritious diets do not get enough of vitamin D. The Department of Health policy recommending a supplement of vitamins A & D for toddlers dates from 1991. The recommendation for a supplement of vitamin D for all children from birth has been reiterated in subsequent government reports and more recently in NICE, Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) and Public Health

England (PHE) recommendations.<sup>12,13,14</sup>

Vitamin A is important for immunity, but the latest National Diet and Nutrition surveys show that in general, toddlers eat adequate amounts in their diets.<sup>2</sup> Whole milk and fruit and vegetables are key providers of this vitamin in the UK diet.

The main source of vitamin D is not food and drinks, but the skin, where it is made in response to sunlight when outside, but only April–September in the UK. Toddlers have a high requirement for this vitamin to support their rapid growth and many become deficient, particularly those in the UK who are of Asian, African and Middle Eastern ethnic origin.<sup>15</sup>

Healthy Start children's vitamin drops are a low cost supplement with vitamins A, C & D. Healthy Start beneficiaries are entitled to them free from their NHS Trust or Board. However only some NHS Trusts/Boards make them available. Other vitamin preparations are available for toddlers in retail outlets but these usually contain other vitamins and are expensive for low income families.







## Respect your toddler's tastes and preferences – don't force feed

**Some children eat almost everything while others are much more picky. Some like foods kept separate on the plate and others are happy with foods mixed in together.**

Toddlers are likely to refuse new foods on sight, without tasting them. Some may even start to refuse foods that they have happily eaten before, because they 'don't look right', however most toddlers grow out of this.

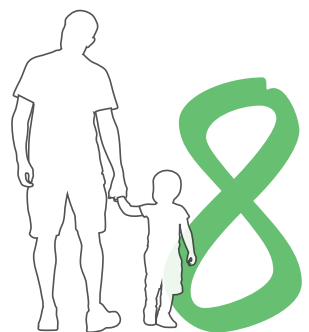
Parents need to be adaptable when serving food and not give up when foods are rejected the first time; toddlers are more likely to learn to like foods as they become more familiar with them.

Each child is an individual and has different preferences for the tastes, textures and colours of food. Some like all foods kept separate on a plate while others are happy with foods mixed in together.

Parents should offer a nutritious diet that accommodates these preferences as well as always offering the usual family foods. New foods should always be offered in very small portions, on a separate plate from the foods the toddler usually eats. In time and by eating with others, most toddlers will widen their set of food preferences.

Frustrated parents may be tempted to force feed when they become concerned that their toddler is not eating enough. However force feeding can make toddlers anxious around food and mealtimes. This anxiety can lead to toddlers losing their appetite and eating even less.

A routine of  
**3 meals**  
and  
**2-3**  
planned nutritious  
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## Reward your toddler with your attention – never give food or drink as a reward, treat or for comfort

**Play, read or talk with your toddler as a reward. Always give fruit or a nutritious pudding – don't use it as a reward for eating other foods first or for good behaviour.**

Foods given as rewards for eating other foods, or given for good behaviour or comfort, are seen by toddlers as more desirable foods than those not given in these situations. If eaten to excess, sweet, high energy reward or comfort foods can contribute to excessive weight gain.

Parents should be advised not to say 'eat up your vegetables then you can have your pudding' as this makes the pudding more desirable than the vegetables in the toddler's mind – the

opposite of a healthy eating message. Fruit or a small nutritious pudding should be given whether a toddler has eaten their first course or not.

Toddlers love their parents' attention and parents should reward their toddler with attention and praise when they are eating well. Refused food should be removed from toddlers without comment or attention – as hard as this may be. Food can then be offered, as usual, at the next meal or snack time.

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## Limit

- **fried food, crisps, packet snacks, pastries, cakes and biscuits to very small amounts.**

## ... and avoid

- **sweetened fruit squash, fizzy drinks, fruit juice, tea and coffee.**
- **whole nuts and small, soft round foods which may cause choking.**

**3 meals**  
and no more than  
**1 snack**  
will significantly  
reduce dental  
caries.

Toddlers naturally prefer high calorie foods, particularly sweet foods and these must be limited to small amounts to avoid excess weight gain.<sup>16</sup>

Frequent intakes of sweet food and drinks are associated with a higher risk of dental caries. By limiting sweet foods to less than four episodes each day, such as three meals and no more than one snack, the risk of dental caries is significantly reduced.<sup>17</sup> Fruit juice and fruit smoothies are sugary drinks and like other sweet drinks can cause dental caries. If used, fruit juice should always be served well diluted and must

be included within the four episodes of sweet food in a day.

Food safety is important in preparing food for toddlers, meat, fish and eggs should all be well cooked. Whole nuts and soft round pieces of foods are a choking hazard but toddlers should always be supervised and seated when eating to reduce this risk.<sup>18</sup>

The Food Standards Agency also advise that children under five should not eat swordfish, marlin and shark as these large fish can accumulate high amounts of mercury over their long lives.<sup>18</sup>



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# Encourage physical activity for at least 3 hours every day and about 12 hours sleep

**All activity such as active play inside and outside, walking, running and dancing counts. Limit screen time particularly in the evening and before bedtime. Discourage / avoid eating whilst using a screen, whether it is watching TV or a mobile device.<sup>19</sup>**

The Department of Health now recommended that under-5s are physically active for at least **3 hours** every day

Most toddlers enjoy active play, particularly with their parents and friends. The Department of Health recommend that under-5s are physically active for at least 3 hours every day.<sup>20</sup> Activities such as active play inside and outside – including playing in the park, walking upstairs, bouncing on a trampoline, dancing, running, walking to nursery and other similar activities – all count. The recommended three hours can be made up of short episodes spread over the whole day.

Physical activity aids the development of toddlers’ physical co-ordination skills necessary for their future enjoyment of sport and other physical activities, which may then contribute to healthy weight management.

Poor sleep may contribute to excess weight gain. For instance, research from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) study found that toddlers who sleep less than about 10 hours in each day/24 hours were more likely to become obese at seven years.<sup>21</sup>

Limiting sedentary behaviours is also important in preventing obesity.



Many sedentary behaviours in childhood are now associated with ‘screen time’. Screen time includes time spent watching television, playing a video game, or using an electronic device with a screen such as a smart-phone or tablet. It is not yet clear which type of screen time most affects the risk of overweight/obesity, and when screen time might have most impact.

Touch screen use in pre-school children has steadily increased from 28% to 58% between 2013 and 2018 <sup>22</sup>. At present there is no evidence, however, that screen time activity displaces active play in infants and toddlers.<sup>23</sup>

**Toddler screen time guidelines**

The World Health Organization’s (WHO) recent guidelines on screen time<sup>24</sup> recommend that infants up to 2 years of age should have no screen time; and that the maximum for a 2-year-old should be one hour.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) guidelines<sup>25</sup> however, recommend that screen use should be restricted before bedtime and that parents should be aware of the risks of snacking whilst passively watching<sup>19</sup>.

**Obesity and screen time**

In older children, foods eaten during passive screen watching are more likely to be calorie dense ‘snack foods’.<sup>26</sup> Research shows that children who are at risk of obesity will eat more whilst passively watching programmes, especially those that include food advertisements.<sup>27</sup> Although this has not been shown in toddlers and pre-school children<sup>28</sup>, a further ALSPAC study did show that three-year-olds who watched more than an average of an hour of TV or DVDs each day were more likely to become obese by seven years of age.<sup>29</sup>

The Five Food Groups		One toddler-size portion is about:
<b>Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Offer at each meal and at some snacks</li><li>• Choose whole grain often</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>½–1 slice</b> whole grain or white bread or <b>1 ¼–¾</b> bread roll</li><li>• <b>3–6 heaped Tbs</b> whole grain or fortified breakfast cereal without a sugarcoating. No need to add extra sugar – sweeten naturally with dried or fresh fruit</li><li>• <b>5–8 Tbs</b> of hot cereal like porridge made up with milk</li><li>• <b>2–5 Tbs</b> of rice or pasta</li><li>• <b>½ – 1½ egg sized</b> potatoes or <b>1–4 Tbs</b> of mashed potato</li><li>• <b>½–2</b> crispbreads or <b>1–3</b> crackers</li></ul>
<b>Fruit and vegetables</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Offer at each meal and at some snacks</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>¼– ½ medium</b> apple, orange, <b>1 ¼– ¾</b> pear or <b>¼ – 1 medium</b> banana</li><li>• <b>3–10 small</b> berries or grapes</li><li>• <b>2–4 Tbs</b> raw, freshly cooked, stewed or mashed fruit</li><li>• <b>1–3 Tbs</b> raw or cooked vegetables, especially dark green, orange and yellow ones</li></ul>
<b>Milk, cheese and yogurt</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 3 toddler portions per day</li><li>• No bottles of milk</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>3–4 oz (100–120 ml)</b> whole cows’ milk as a drink in a cup</li><li>• <b>1 small pot (125 ml)</b> yogurt or 2 x 60g pots of fromage frais</li><li>• <b>2–4 Tbs</b> grated cheese</li><li>• Cheese in a sandwich or on a piece of pizza</li><li>• <b>5–7 Tbs</b> custard or <b>4–6 Tbs</b> milk pudding</li><li>• Give whole milk rather than lower fat milks from 12 months of age until at least 2 years of age</li></ul>
<b>Meat, fish, eggs, nuts and pulses</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 2 to 3 toddler portions per day</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>2–4 Tbs</b> ground, chopped or cubed lean meats, fish or poultry</li><li>• <b>½–1</b> whole egg</li><li>• <b>2–4 Tbs</b> whole pulses (beans, lentils, dahl) or <b>1–2 Tbs</b> hummus</li><li>• <b>½–1 Tbs</b> peanut butter or <b>1–2 Tbs</b> ground or crushed nuts</li></ul>
<b>Oils, butter and fat spreads</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Include small amounts twice a day</li><li>• Choose high omega 3 oils e.g. rapeseed, olive and soya oils</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>1 Tsp</b> oil</li><li>• <b>1 Tsp</b> butter or fat spread</li><li>• <b>1–2 Tsp</b> mayonnaise</li><li>• <b>1 Tbs</b> cream</li></ul>
<b>Sugary foods and packet snacks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Toddlers under two years of age have lower energy requirements and should not be offered any sweet puddings, cakes, biscuits, confectionery, chocolate or savoury snacks such as crisps.</li><li>• Over two years of age you can offer small amounts of sweet foods and salty snack foods occasionally but these should not be a regular part of a toddler’s everyday foods.</li></ul>		<p><b>Once a day:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>½–1</b> digestive biscuit or <b>1–2</b> small biscuits or 1 small slice cake or pudding</li><li>• <b>1 Tsp</b> jam or honey or added sugar</li></ul> <p><b>If given, limit to once a week only:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>4–6</b> crisps or <b>2–4</b> sweets or <b>1 small</b> fun-sized chocolate bar or a sweet drink such as squash or fruit juice</li></ul>

Tbs = tablespoons Tsp = teaspoons  
This list of the five food groups includes the recommended number of portions of food that should be offered from each food group to give an ideal combination of nutrients for toddlers.

There are no set portion sizes of food for toddlers as there is a wide variation in the quantities eaten between toddlers and by one toddler from day to day or meal to meal. Here we have provided a range of portion sizes to give parents and carers an idea of the quantities to offer toddlers. Smaller, younger toddlers will probably eat the quantity at the lower end of the range whilst older, larger toddlers will eat towards the upper end of the range. However this will vary from meal to meal.

Food and drinks high in fat and sugar should always be limited to small portion sizes and should not be offered in place of foods from the other more nutritious food groups.

The Forum would like to thank the many healthcare professional bodies and expert medical reviewers who contributed to the development of this document.

For further information visit: [www.infantandtoddlerforum.org](http://www.infantandtoddlerforum.org)

**The Infant & Toddler Forum CIC is committed to a world where every child has the healthiest start in life**

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