

[Childhood Nutrition](#)

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Don't just feed your children good food, teach them how to eat right their whole life

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Childhood illness is on the rise. many kids are diagnosed with obesity, diabetes, asthma, chronic otitis media (ear damage), ADD, ADHD and more. Research has shown that the standard American diet causes or contributes to many of these diseases. It is imperative that parents know how to feed their children correctly at each stage of their lives and teach them the nutritional knowledge and habits they need for a lifetime of good health.

In Ayurveda, a child's nutrition is divided into three stages: kshirup, the period of nursing; kshiranaad, the feeding of solid food mixed with milk; and anaad, solid food. In the kshirup stage, lasting six months to a year, the infant's nutrition is his mother's milk. Infant formula was designed to be a medical nutritional tool for babies who are unable to breast feed. Formula does not fully meet the nutritional and immunity needs of infants, leaving their immune systems failing. Babies who are breast fed are less likely to get sick with diarrhea, gastrointestinal illness, urinary-tract infections, respiratory disease or pneumonia and rarely suffer sudden infant death syndrome. They are less likely to have allergies, less likely to have later weight problems, less likely to have ear infections and--according to a study published in JAMA issue of May 8, 2002--more likely to be more intelligent.

In the kshiranaad stage from one to two years old, milk is slowly tapered off while side-by-side fruit juices, pulp, syrups, soups of pulses and vegetables are started. Rice, beans such as mung and lentils, different fruits (especially ripened bananas),

nut milk, vegetables and milk products are excellent. Ayurvedic medicine does not recommend introduction of solids before six months of age.

The stage of solid food, *annaad*, begins at two. I highly recommend eating together as a family. It is a comforting ritual for both parents and kids. Children like the predictability of family meals, and parents get a chance to catch up with their kids. Studies have shown that kids who take part in regular family meals are also more likely to eat fruits, vegetables and grains, less likely to snack on unhealthy foods, less likely to smoke, use marijuana or drink alcohol. Involve your children in meal planning and preparation, especially your teens, as it will keep them interested in participating. Keep mealtime calm and congenial. The dinner table is not the place for parental lectures or sibling arguments.

At the main meals, serve good sources of protein, such as beans and nuts. Choose whole-grain breads and cereals so your child gets more fiber. Serve water, milk, freshly squeezed juice or smoothies. By drinking milk, kids boost their intake of calcium, which is important for healthy bones. That means 800 milligrams (mg) a day for kids ages 6 to 8 and 1,300 mg a day after age 9. Use only organic dairy products. Kids will develop allergies to milk if they are introduced to cow's milk earlier than six month of age. Consumption of dairy products, especially yogurt, kefir, lassi, butter and ghee is very helpful. I believe it is better for kids to have whole and non-homogenized milk. Saturated fat is very important for development of a healthy nervous system.

It is important that you don't do battle over food with your children. Let the kids decide if they're hungry, what they will eat from the foods served and when they're full. Establish a predictable schedule of meals and snacks. Kids like knowing what to expect. Don't force kids to clean their plates. Doing so teaches them to override feelings of fullness. Don't bribe or reward them with food. Avoid using dessert as the prize for eating the meal. Don't use food as a way of showing love. When you want to show love, give them a hug, some quality time or praise.

I recommend you stock the pantry and refrigerator with healthy snacks, such as yogurt, peanut butter and celery, whole grained crackers and cheese. This will make it easier for you to limit fast food and other low-nutrient snacks, such as chips and candy. But don't completely ban such snacks from your home. Instead, make them "once-in-a-while " foods, so your child doesn't feel deprived. For an education in junk food, I recommend viewing (after previewing) the documentary "Supersize

Me " with your kids. It will be an eye-opener.

Thoughtful parents will limit sugary drinks, such as soda and fruit-flavored drinks. Many of these are also loaded with caffeine. A 12-ounce bottle of Coke has 46 milligrams of caffeine, the same as a cup of coffee. At lower levels, caffeine can make people feel more alert and like they have more energy. In both kids and adults, too much caffeine can cause jitteriness and nervousness, upset stomach, headaches, difficulty concentrating, difficulty sleeping, increased heart rate and increased blood pressure.

In 1996, researchers made discoveries about diet with important implications for childhood nutrition. They found that boys with lower levels of omega-3 fatty acids in their blood showed more problems with behavior, learning and health than those with higher levels of total omega-3 fatty acids. The omega-3 fat and its derivative, DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), is so essential to a child's development that if a mother and infant are deficient in it, the child's nervous system and immune system may never fully develop, and it can cause a lifetime of unexplained emotional, learning and immune system disorders. Rich sources of omega-3 fatty acids are nuts and seeds. Include one or two handfuls of raw, unroasted fresh nuts and seeds in your diet. Another way to incorporate nuts and seeds is to soak them in water and make nut milk.

The vegetarian family needs to be sure they get these nutrients in their diet: vitamin B12 from dairy products and vitamin-fortified products, such as cereals, breads and soy (limit soy to once or twice a week) and rice drinks; vitamin D from dairy products, calcium-fortified orange juice and vitamin-fortified products; Calcium from dairy products, dark green leafy vegetables, broccoli, chickpeas and calcium-fortified products, including orange juice, soy and rice drinks and cereals; protein from dairy products, tofu, dried bean and nuts; iron from dried beans, dried fruits, whole grains, leafy green vegetables and iron-fortified cereals and bread; and zinc from wheat germ, nuts, fortified cereal and legumes.

If you can be a dietary roll model yourself and follow the advice given here, you will not only raise healthy children, you'll give them a life-long gift of wise eating habits.

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