



*Best practices*  
for feeding your child  
from 0 to 5 years of age



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# Best practices for feeding your child from 0 to 5 years of age

Diet, feeding and eating behaviors when your child is a baby and during her early childhood play an important role in establishing healthy food preferences and behaviors, preventing both undernutrition and obesity. Food safety is also important as the immune systems of infants and young children are still developing. As a result they are highly vulnerable to foodborne illness. This brochure, intended for parents and caregivers of infants and children under 5 years of age, is intended to give general guidance on what and how to feed to foster healthy growth and development of young children.

During the first 5 years of life, your child will go through many developmental milestones. However, in terms of feeding and nutrition, these years are usually divided into three broad categories:



**Birth to 6 months**, corresponding to the recommended period of exclusive breastfeeding



**6 to 24 months**, corresponding to the recommended period of continued breastfeeding and complementary feeding



**24 to 59 months**, corresponding to the period the period when a child eats family foods

For each age group, there are some practices that you can do to help your child grow strong and healthy. These are described in the following.





Birth to  
6 months

## Give *only breast milk* to your baby until she is 6 months old

For the first six months all the nutrients and fluids, including water, your baby needs are provided by breast milk. Breast milk protects your baby from many common childhood illnesses, such as diarrhea, ear infections and respiratory infections. It also contributes to your baby's brain development and provides warmth and security. Breastfeeding may make it less likely that your baby will suffer from overweight, obesity and diabetes later in life.

There are some things you can do to make sure you give the best food to your baby:

- *Seek support of your family and community for help with housework and care of other children.*
- *If you have any difficulties, seek help from a lactation consultant or health worker.*
- *Assert your right to breastfeed at any place, even in public.*
- *Make sure to know your rights at the workplace, and seek support of co-workers if needed.*

## *Breastfeed whenever* your baby wants

Breastfeeding regulates the appetite, so there is no risk your baby will have too much. Also, the more your baby suckles, the more breast milk you will produce. This will ensure that you will always have enough breast milk for your baby.





6 to 24  
months

## Continue breastfeeding until your child is 2 years of age or older

Breast milk continues to be an important source of nutrition and immune protection throughout this period of life. During your child's second year of life, it provides about one-third of her energy requirements and contributes substantially to her protein requirements. Because it is high in fat, breast milk is a key source of good fats, some of which promote brain development. It also provides substantial amounts of many vitamins and minerals. However, breast milk is low in some minerals including iron and zinc. The nutritional impact of breastfeeding is particularly important during illness, when your child's appetite for other foods may decrease but breast-milk intake is maintained. Thus, it plays a key role in preventing dehydration and providing nutrients when your child is sick.



## Pay attention to your child's appetite and talk to your child while feeding her

Optimal feeding depends not only on what is fed, but also on how, when, where, and by whom a child is fed. Attention to your child's cues of hunger ensures that she is encouraged to eat enough food. Attention to her cues of satiety ensures that she is not fed or given more food than she needs. Responsive feeding, or attention to your child's cues of hunger and satiety, can help to reduce her risk of both undernutrition and overweight.

Feed slowly and patiently and encourage your child to eat, but do not force her. If your child refuses certain foods, combine those foods with others in different combinations, and with different textures, and methods of encouragement. Minimize distractions during meals if your child loses interest easily. Remember that feeding times are periods of learning and love – talk to your child with eye-to-eye contact.



YORDANIS CABRERA TASSÉ  
– PAHO/WHO

## Allow an older infant and young child to feed herself when she or he is ready

Older infants and young children like to use their hands to explore solid food. You can notice when your child is ready to eat by herself when she starts to reach for food and put it in her mouth. Although this is messy, it allows a child to explore and like healthy food and should be encouraged. At about 8 months, your baby will start to try to spoon-feed herself and will most likely to drink from a cup with less spilling. By 12 months your child should be able to feed herself using a spoon and drink from a cup. However, you, your partner or a caregiver will still need to also need to pay attention to be sure she is getting enough food and/or feed her some of the time.



## Keep food, hands and utensils clean

Attention to hygienic practices during food preparation, feeding, and storage is critical for preventing diarrhea and other food-borne illnesses. Because they are difficult to keep clean, feeding bottles are a particularly important route of transmission of pathogens. In addition to the washing of hands by the food preparer, your child's hands should also be washed before eating. Children should be taught at a young age to wash their hands before eating. Serve only the portion(s) that your child is likely to eat separate from a jar or bowl.

This will avoid the unconsumed portion getting mixed up with your child's saliva and prevent bacterial growth. Discard any unconsumed portion offered. Honey should not be given to infants (12 months and younger) since it may cause a serious condition known as botulism. **Five keys for practicing food safety are outlined in the Box.**



## Increase the portions and feed more often

Beginning at 6 months of age, your baby needs foods in addition to breast milk to satisfy her nutritional requirements. The number of times she is fed must be increased as she gets older. Nutrient-dense meals should be provided 2-3 times each day at 6-8 months and 3-4 times each day at 9-24 months. Additional nutritious snacks, such as a piece of fruit or bread, can be offered 1-2 times each day. The amount of food offered will depend on the nutrient density. Iron- and zinc-rich foods, such as meat, are particularly important as breast milk is low in these minerals.

## Give foods with appropriate consistency

Gradually increase food consistency and variety as your child gets older, adapting to her growing nutritional needs and abilities. Your baby can eat pureed, mashed and semi-solid foods beginning at 6 months. By 8 months, she is also likely to be able to eat “finger foods” or snacks that can be eaten alone. By 12 months, she can eat the same types of foods as consumed by the rest of the family and eat by herself. However, because her nutrient requirements are high relative to her energy needs, the foods they eat still need to be nutrient dense. Foods that can cause choking such as nuts, grapes or raw carrots should be avoided until she is able to fully chew them before swallowing.

## Provide a variety of foods

Older infants and young children need a variety of foods that include:

- Fruits of many colors
- Vegetables, especially dark green, red and orange types
- Animal-source foods - meat, poultry, fish and eggs
- Legumes such as peas, beans, or lentils
- Grains, preferably whole wheat, such as bread, pasta, or unsweetened cereal
- Nuts and seeds
- Dairy such as cheese or yogurt. If a child is no longer breastfed, milk is also needed.



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## Avoid deep-fried foods and give foods with "good fats"

Deep-fried foods should be avoided since they lead to obesity and diseases when your child gets older. Fats can be both good and bad. "Good fats" are important in her diet because they provide essential fatty acids, help with the absorptions of some vitamins, and increase energy density and improve taste. Breast milk is generally a better source of fats than most complementary foods. Good fats include most vegetable oils and olive oil and those from fatty fish and some nuts. Other good fats are in avocados, peanut oils and other seed oils. Bad fats include coconut and palm oils. Other examples of bad fats include fatty meats and chicken skins.



## Do not give ultra-processed food products

Ultra-processed products, such as sugar-sweetened beverages, industrialized foods and fast foods, have nothing nutritious, only sugar, salt and bad fats. They reinforce your child's strong preference for these foods and decrease her appetite for nutritious foods, making it more difficult for her to learn to like healthy foods such as vegetables and fruits, and plain water. They contribute to obesity and sugary foods also cause cavities. Adding sugars to fruit juices and other home-prepared beverages, meals and snacks should also be avoided.





## Give safe water to children older than 6 months

Older infants and children need safe water to stay hydrated. Safe water is free from harmful microorganisms and substances that cause health problems. It is important that water used for both drinking and food preparation is safe. Children 1-3 years old need about 5-8 ounce cups of fluids per day. A child older than 3 years needs about 6-8 ounce cups of fluids per day. Safe water is recommended.

It is particularly important to offer water when it is hot outside and your child is physically active.



## Give vitamin-mineral supplements only if recommended by doctors and health workers

If your child is eating a healthy, nutritious diet, multivitamins are not needed. However, if your doctor or health care provider recommends giving multivitamins to your child, be sure to choose a brand that is low in sugar. Giving animal-source foods such as meat, chicken, fish and eggs can help ensure that nutrient requirements are met.

## Give more foods and drinks when the child is ill, and during recovery

Increase fluid intake during illness, including more frequent breastfeeding for breastfed infants and young children, and encouraging a child to eat soft, varied, appetizing, and favorite foods. After illness, some children will need more food than usual and encouragement to eat to regain weight lost.



   24 to 59  
months

Most of the practices for the 6- to 23-month-old child also apply to this age group. A few additional tips are provided below.



## Give more foods and more often, and continue giving a variety of foods

As children grow, they need more food to satisfy their nutritional requirements, though generally need 3 meals each day with 2 snacks.

## Let the child eat by herself, but supervise her

Children in this age range are fully capable of eating by themselves; however, a parent or caregiver should still make sure they are eating a sufficient amount of the right foods and do not consume too much.

## Limit the amount of sugary sweets and salty and fatty industrialized foods given

At this age, your child will pay attention to sugary beverages, snacks and sweets she may see around her. Explain that these are not good for her and offer a glass of water and/or piece of fruit instead. Sugary drinks and sweets should not form part of a regular diet.

## Do not give food as reward for good behavior, nor withhold food to punish the child

Your child will link food to good or bad feelings, and this may influence her appetite in a negative way. It could cause her to eat too little or too much. If your child is unhappy but not hungry, calm your child reading a story, talking or playing with her. Give food if the child is hungry.



# Definitions

**Exclusive breastfeeding** means that a child receives only breast milk and no other liquids or solids are given – not even water – with the exception of oral rehydration solution, or drops/syrups of vitamins, minerals or medicines.

## **Complementary feeding**

is a process that starts when breast milk (or infant formula) is complemented by other foods and beverages and continues until the child fully transitions to family foods, usually at about 24 months.

## **Complementary foods**

are semisolid and solid foods and beverages other than breast milk (or infant formula) provided to an infant or young child to provide nutrients and energy. Because a child has high nutrient requirements relative to their need for energy, complementary foods need to be nutrient-dense so as to satisfy their nutrient requirements.

**Responsive feeding** is when a parent or caregiver is sensitive to a child's cues for hunger and satiety. It involves a) feeding infants directly and assisting older children to feed themselves; b) feeding slowly and patiently, encouraging a child to eat, but not forcing them; c) experimenting with different food combinations, tastes, textures and methods of encouragement if a child refuses a food(s); d) minimizing distractions; and e) remembering that feedings are periods of learning and love and that a child should be spoken to with eye-to-eye contact.

**Food safety** is about hygiene, handling, storing and preparing food to prevent infection. It consists of a) keeping food clean; (2) separating raw and cooked foods; (3) cooking thoroughly; (4) keeping food at safe temperatures; and (5) using safe water and raw materials. For infants and young children it also involves reducing food-related mouth burns from offering fluids or solid foods that are excessively hot and ensuring that foods provided do not put an infant or young child at risk of choking.

**Nutrient-dense foods** are those which supply generous amounts of one or more nutrients compared to the number of calories they supply are called nutrient dense. Eggs, for example, have a high nutrient density, because they provide protein and many vitamins and minerals in proportion their calories. Meat, fish, and poultry are other examples of nutrient-dense foods.

## **Sugar-sweetened beverages**

are sugary sodas and sugary fruit drinks that contribute little other than energy, replace water and other nutritious foods and contribute to overweight and obesity. They also reinforce a child's strong preference for sugar.

**Ultra-processed foods** are ready-to-consume industrialized food products that are energy-dense, fatty, and sugary. They are also very palatable and widely available. They reinforce children's strong preference for sugary, salty, and fatty foods, decrease their appetite for nutritious foods, and replace nutritious foods and water. They contribute to overweight and obesity.

## **Fast foods**

are foods that can be prepared quickly and easily and sold in fast-food restaurants, on the street, and in snack bars. They are high in fat, salt, sugar and energy. Similar to ultra-processed food products, they reinforce children's strong preference for sugary, salty, and fatty foods, decrease their appetite for nutritious foods, and replace nutritious foods. They contribute to overweight and obesity.

# Five keys to safer food



## Keep clean

- Wash your hands before handling food and often during food preparation
- Wash your hands after going to the toilet
- Wash and sanitize all surfaces and equipment used for food preparation
- Protect kitchen areas and food from insects, pests and other animals



## Separate raw and cooked food

- Separate raw meat, poultry and seafood from other foods
- Use separate equipment and utensils such as knives and cutting boards for handling raw foods
- Store food in containers to avoid contact between raw and prepared foods



## Cook thoroughly

- Cook food thoroughly, especially meat, poultry, eggs and seafood
- Bring foods like soups and stews to boiling to make sure that they have reached 70 °C. For meat and poultry, make sure that juices are clear, not pink. Ideally, use a thermometer
- Reheat cooked food thoroughly



## Keep food at safe temperatures

- Do not leave cooked food at room temperature for more than 2 hours
- Refrigerate promptly all cooked and perishable food (preferably below 5 °C) prior to serving
- Do not store food too long even in the refrigerator
- Do not thaw frozen food at room temperature



## Use safe water and raw materials

- Use safe water or treat it to make it safe
- Select fresh and wholesome foods
- Choose foods processed for safety, such as pasteurized milk
- Wash fruits and vegetables, especially if eaten raw
- Do not use food beyond its expiry date



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Source: WHO. Five keys to safer food manual. World Health Organization, Geneva: 2006

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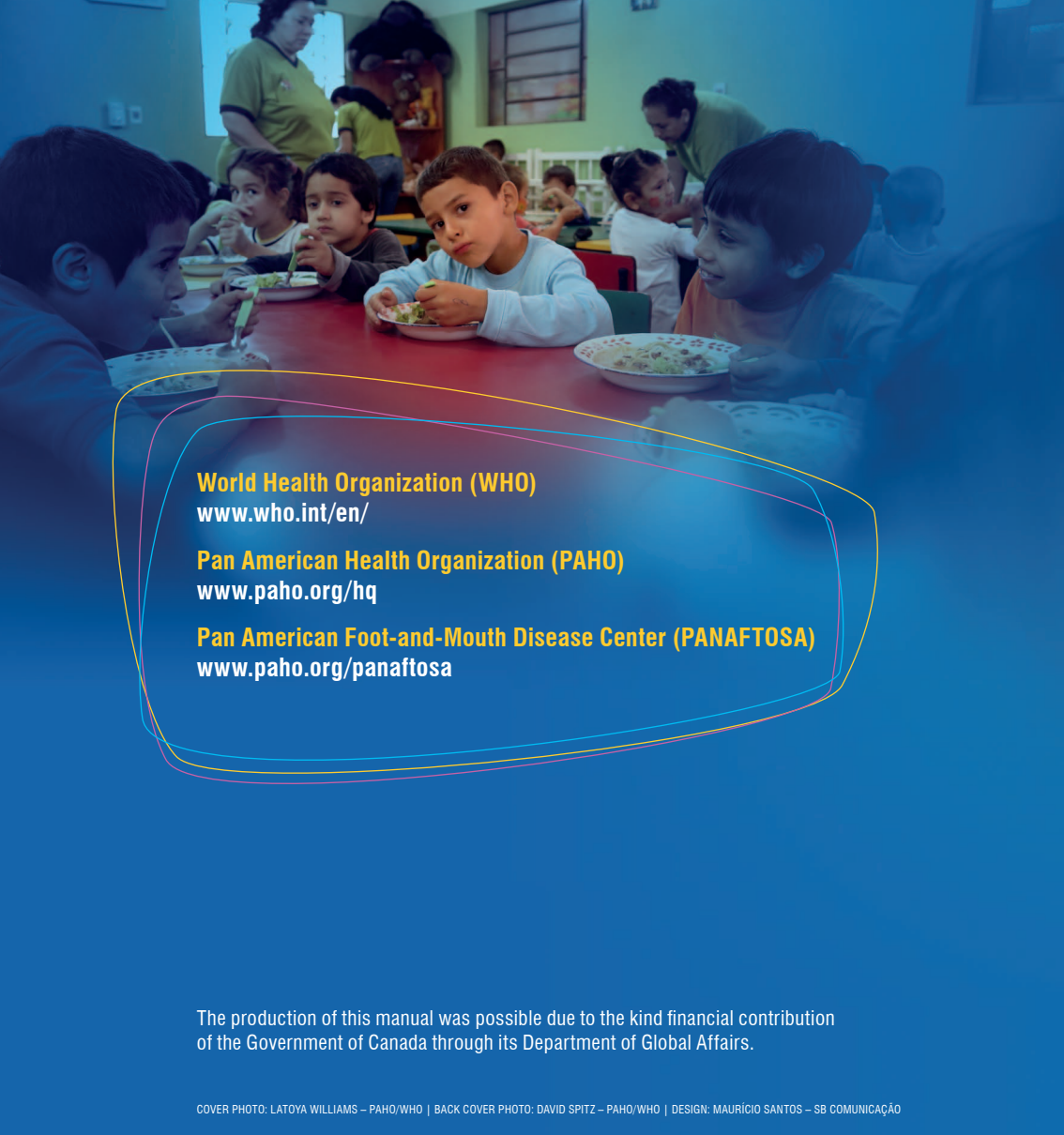


**For additional information consult:**

WHO. Five keys to safer food manual. World Health Organization, Geneva: 2006. Available at [http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/43546/1/9789241594639\\_eng.pdf?ua=1](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/43546/1/9789241594639_eng.pdf?ua=1)







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