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No longer babies, but not quite big kids - toddlers' needs, in all aspects, are changing. They are becoming increasingly independent and learning new things every day; mastering new skills and trying new foods. When it comes to making sound dietary choices for your toddler, it is important to remember that you are establishing lifelong eating habits. Teaching your toddler to eat a healthy diet will help to ensure a healthy future.

No More "Baby" Food

Toddlers can eat pretty much what the rest of your family eats - as long as you are serving a variety of wholesome foods. Junk food isn't recommended for toddlers, but then again, it shouldn't be a frequent part of your diet, either. It's a good idea to sit as a family for meals to establish an evening routine of sharing not only the meal, but also to give the family a chance to chat and share their day's experiences. Good table manners are also begun at this age.

Good First Choices

If you haven't made the switch from breast milk or formula to cow's milk, talk to your child's paediatrician about recommendations for transitioning. Typically, weaning is at about 12 months, but some breastfeeding mothers continue beyond that point. Most doctors agree that breastfeeding can continue as long as both the mother and the child are happy with the situation. When you are ready to wean, whole milk should be given, never low fat or nonfat milk. Toddlers need the additional fat contained in whole milk for proper development.

Whole eggs are often enjoyed by toddlers and if there is no family history of nut allergies, paediatricians often approve peanut butter, a longstanding childhood favourite. Toddlers have been accustomed to a fairly bland diet up to this point, so once they begin to eat regular family meals, they will tend to prefer simple foods. Vegetables without butter or sauces, mashed potatoes and small bits of mildly seasoned meats are usually accepted readily.

Variety is Key

Much like in a healthy adult diet, variety is important. Toddlers who are introduced to an assortment of fruits, vegetables, grains and lean proteins will learn to enjoy a well balanced diet. Serve seasonal produce and focus on deep coloured vegetables since they are the richest sources of nutrients. Choose whole grains over processed ones and make beans and legumes a regular part of your toddler's diet. Children are usually happy to eat dairy products such as cheese and yoghurt, but be sure that the yoghurt you purchase isn't loaded with added sugars.

Toddlers can be picky, but continue to make the effort. It is easy to get in the habit of offering the same foods over and over, but by making the effort to develop your toddler's acceptance of a wide assortment of foods; you will save yourself considerable trouble at the dinner table in the future.

Snacking is Okay

Toddlers cannot eat a large quantity at one sitting and do much better when they are allowed to enjoy small portions over the course of the day. Mid-morning, afternoon and evening snacks, as long as they are healthy, are good ways to be sure that your toddler has the opportunity to eat enough to promote energy and healthy development. Check with your child's paediatrician for portion recommendations based on your toddler's height, weight, activity level and overall health. Ideal snacks for toddlers include fresh or unsweetened canned or frozen fruit, vegetables with yogurt dip, peanut butter on whole grain crackers, cheese and toasted raisin bread.

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Some foods such as crisps, chips, sweets and processed baked goods should not be fed. Toddlers have a limited capacity for daily food consumption, so they must not be allowed to fill up on things that aren't good for them.

Fruit juices, fizzy drinks and other sugary drinks are also not recommended for toddlers. They are high in calories but offer little in the way of nutritional value. It is recommended that at meal and snack times, toddlers are offered solid foods before they are given their drink since even a healthy beverage such as milk should not take the place of eating food. If a toddler is thirsty between meals, offer plain water.

Some foods pose a choking hazard to toddlers. Be cautious about serving hot dogs, grapes, cherry tomatoes, whole nuts, popcorn, raw carrots, celery or chunks of tough meat. Many of these foods are permissible when cut into small pieces, but always supervise toddlers at meal and snack times. Since most toddlers are learning to feed themselves, you have to be alert since they have a tendency to overstuff their mouths.

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