

# Nutrition and Children With Disabilities

## TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

### What nutritional concerns are common in children with disabilities?

Many children with disabilities have health issues that can impact their nutritional well-being and eating habits. This makes meeting your child's nutritional needs even more important. Some issues that might affect your child include:

- Slower oral-motor development
  - Larger tongues, smaller teeth, challenges with chewing
  - Food texture preferences
- Constipation
- Picky-eating or eating the same foods
- Weight gain
  - Body metabolism burns fewer calories
  - Hypothyroidism
- Celiac disease
- Acid reflux

### What is included in a healthy diet for your child?

You can work to improve these issues by providing your child with a well-rounded diet. The amount of foods recommended from each food group varies by age. Include a variety of different foods from each food group: Fruits/Vegetables, Protein, Grains, and Dairy.

### What is important to know about each food group?

**Fruits and vegetables** are an excellent way to provide your child with essential vitamins and minerals that may reduce risks for certain chronic diseases, such as heart disease, certain types of cancer, and type-2 diabetes. They also provide an excellent source of fiber that helps to fight weight gain, heart disease, and prevent constipation.

When preparing your child's meals, try to fill half of their plate with fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables can be purchased fresh, frozen, canned, or dried. When possible, choose fresh local produce. Frozen vegetables are also a good option since they are picked and frozen at their peak ripeness. Just aim for variety and watch out for added salt and sugar!



Foods that contain **protein** include: meat, fish, poultry, beans, peas, eggs, nuts, and seeds. Protein supports growth, builds muscles, and develops bones. When thinking about your child's protein choices, go lean and choose a variety of different sources.

Protein-rich foods provide a variety of nutrients, including vitamins B and E, iron, zinc, and magnesium. These are needed to help the body release energy, carry oxygen around the body, and to keep a healthy immune system. Additionally, adding fish such as tuna or salmon to your child's diet will provide essential fatty acids that may help prevent heart disease.

Aim to buy the leanest cuts of beef or pork. For ground meats, try to purchase at least 90% lean. Also, remove the skin from poultry. Try dried or canned beans, tuna, and salmon, but watch out for sodium. Limit buying processed meats such as sausage and deli meats. Aim for variety!

**Grains** include wheat, barley, rice, oats, or other cereal grains. When thinking about your child's grain choices, aim for whole grains. Whole grains are a great source of fiber that help reduce the risk for heart disease and prevent constipation. Grains also help with weight maintenance. B vitamins and iron help with the body's energy and delivery of oxygen, while magnesium and selenium build bones, selenium build bones, release energy, and protect the immune system.

*Please see reverse.*



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Food Groups: Daily Servings by Age					
	2-3 Yrs	4-5 Yrs	6-8 Yrs	9-17 Yrs	18+ Yrs
Grains (oz)	3 oz	5 oz	5 oz	6 oz	6 oz
Veggies (cup)	1/3 cup	1/2 cup	2 cups	2 1/2 cups	2 1/2 cups
Fruits (cup)	1/3 cup	1/2 cup	1 1/2 cup	1 1/2 cup	2 cup
Dairy (cup)	2 cups	2 1/2 cups	2 1/2 cups	3 cups	3 cups
Protein (oz)	2 oz	3 oz	5 oz	5 oz	5 1/2-6 oz

Choose products that list 100% whole grain or whole wheat in the first three ingredients. If your child does not like the look of whole wheat pastas or flours, try purchasing the whole wheat white pastas and breads. Try brown rice instead of white and aim for cereals without added sugars.

**Dairy** products include milk, cheese, and yogurt. For individuals who are lactose intolerant, try soy, coconut, or almond milk varieties. When purchasing dairy products, choose low-fat options.

Most dairy products are an excellent source of calcium, potassium, vitamin D, and protein, which are all essential for proper bone development and prevention of osteoporosis. Since children and teens are growing rapidly, it is important they get sufficient amounts of these nutrients. Milk products may also help reduce the risk of heart disease and type-2 diabetes.

### Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)** works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, service providers and advocates, researchers and policy makers. It is among only a few centers nationwide to be a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, a *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center, and a Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities Training Program. The following are some of the ways the Center's programs and staff can assist families, educators, and other service providers.

### Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder is a free statewide phone, web, and print referral service in English and Spanish. It connects the Tennessee disability community with service providers and resources. Its website database has over 3,000 agencies searchable by TN county and service. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC, TN Council on Developmental Disabilities, TN Department of Health, and the TN Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Contact [www.familypathfinder.org](http://www.familypathfinder.org), (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636.

### Other Resources

- Guthrie Medlen, Joan E. (2006). *The Down Syndrome Nutrition Handbook: A Guide to Promoting Healthy Lifestyles*. Lake Oswego, OR: Phronesis Publishing.
- **Kids Eat Right** - [www.kidseatright.org](http://www.kidseatright.org)
- **Fruit and Veggies More Matters**  
[www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org](http://www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org)
- **USDA's ChooseMyPlate** - [www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)
- **Raising Healthy Eaters Website**  
[www.raisehealthyeaters.com](http://www.raisehealthyeaters.com)
- **Live Better America**  
[livebetteramerica.aol.com/news/livebetteramerica-food](http://livebetteramerica.aol.com/news/livebetteramerica-food)
- **Super Healthy Kids** - [www.superhealthykids.com](http://www.superhealthykids.com)

*Content for this tip sheet was developed by Jenna R. Brinkman as a component of her participation in the Dietetic Internship Program at Vanderbilt University.*

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