

2 What is healthy eating for children?

Most of us recognise that some patterns of food intake are healthier than others. An over reliance on foods that contain large amounts of saturated fats, sugars and salt, combined with a low intake of fruits, vegetables and cereal foods, leads to adverse health consequences such as overweight/obesity and associated social rejection (NHMRC 2003). For this reason, many children's interventions have focused only on changes in nutrient intake (for example, changes in fat intake). However, a focus on food intake, food patterns, the experience of food and an enjoyment of eating is more likely to develop long lasting positive attitudes towards healthy eating (Johnson and Johnson 1985; Pollard 2001; Tapper, Horne and Lowe 2003).

In the Review of Children's Healthy Eating Interventions (Worsley and Crawford 2004), 'healthy eating' was defined as the consumption of a wide variety of fresh fruit, vegetables, legumes and wholegrain cereal foods, as well as dairy and animal foods (or other protein-rich foods) along the lines suggested by *The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating* (Smith, Kellett and Schmerlaib 1998) and *The Australian Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents* (NHMRC 2003). However, this is a fairly limited definition; for some people, 'healthy eating' can include other aspects of eating such as:

- eating only to satisfy appetite or hunger (so-called 'intuitive eating');
- enjoying a variety of different foods and flavours (see, for example, Ehrlich and Murkies 2001);
- uncoerced eating—that is, not being forced to eat particular foods; and
- having regular meals and snacks.

The Australian Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents and the *Australian Guide to Healthy Eating* are vital guides for practitioners who wish to promote healthy eating among children.

The Australian Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents

Recently revised, *The Australian Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents* (NHMRC 2003) (figure 1) form the basis of most public health nutrition approaches in Australia. They are the most up-to-date summary of the basic principles of human nutrition as they relate to the Australian population's health. For this reason, they are essential reading for all practitioners who are trying to promote healthy eating among children, because they define 'healthy eating'.

Figure 1: Extract from The Australian Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents

Encourage and support breastfeeding

Children and adolescents need sufficient nutritious food to grow and develop normally

- Growth should be checked regularly for young children
- Physical activity is important for all children and adolescents

Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods

Children and adolescents should be encouraged to:

- Eat plenty of vegetables, legumes and fruit
- Eat plenty of cereals (including breads, rice, pasta and noodles), preferably wholegrain
- Include lean meat, fish, poultry and/or alternatives
- Include milks, yoghurts, cheese and/or alternatives
 - Reduced fat milks are not suitable for young children under 2 years, because of their high energy needs, but reduced fat varieties should be encouraged for older children and adolescents
- Choose water as a drink
 - Alcohol is not recommended for children

and care should be taken to:

- Limit saturated fat and moderate total fat intake
 - Low fat diets are not suitable for infants
- Choose foods low in salt
- Consume only moderate amounts of sugars and foods containing added sugars.

Care for your child's food: prepare and store it safely

These guidelines are not in order of importance

Each one deals with an issue that is key to optimal health. Two relate to the quantity and quality of the food we eat—getting the right types of food in the right amounts to meet the body's nutrient needs and to reduce the risk of chronic disease. Given the epidemic of obesity we are currently experiencing in Australia, one of these guidelines specifically relates to the need to be active and to avoid overeating. Another guideline stresses the need to be vigilant about food safety, and, in view of the increasing awareness of the importance of early nutrition, there is a further guideline that encourages everyone to support and promote breastfeeding.

Source: NHMRC (2003)

The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating

The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating (Smith, Kelleet and Schmerlaib 1998) is the official Australian Government guide to healthy eating. Extensively tested among several Australian population groups (Smith, Kelleet and Schmerlaib 1988), it provides a useful basis for education and counselling activities.

Figure 2: The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating

