

## Eat well

Healthy eating  
for good  
oral health



### Key messages

For babies, toddlers and children to achieve good oral health, eating a healthy well-balanced diet is important. To achieve this it is recommended that:

- Babies (from around 6 months), toddlers and children should enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods from the five food groups.
- Breastfeeding is best for babies.
- Babies, toddlers and children should enjoy healthy meals and snacks.
- Limit intake of sugary (sweetened) foods and snacks.
- Offer water to children when they eat. (Refer to Drink well section on [page 19](#)).

### Rationale

Tooth decay is a diet related disease caused by acids on the enamel on the tooth surface. This affects everyone including babies, toddlers and children. Maintaining good oral health is a balancing act. The cycle begins when food and drinks are consumed; including breastmilk, infant formula and baby food. Carbohydrates (sugars) in food and drinks attach to the plaque on teeth. This creates acid which can decay the teeth. Cleaning teeth removes the plaque. However, limiting the amount of sugar in a baby, toddler or child's diet is an important element of maintaining good oral health. Lower levels of sugar in the diet decreases the level of acid produced. To further minimise the number of acid attacks eating regular meals and healthy snacks is important.

#### Did you know ...

children who regularly and frequently eat a diet high in processed and sugary foods are more likely to experience tooth decay.

## Evidence

There is significant evidence that shows the relationship between a diet high in added sugar and tooth decay. The National Health and Medical Research Council's Infant Feeding Guidelines and Dietary Guidelines strongly support good nutrition and oral health. The Infant Feeding Guidelines' advice for parents states "Consumption of nutrient poor foods with high levels of fat/saturated fat, sugar, and/or salt (e.g. cakes, biscuits, confectionary and potato chips) should be avoided or limited." (NHMRC, p89, 2012). A healthy diet in early childhood is important for children's growth and development and for "laying the foundation for children's lifelong healthy relationship with food" (Woodrow & McCrea, 2011).

In Victoria, breastfeeding initiation is relatively high with 85.8 per cent of babies being breastfed when discharged from hospital. However, this dramatically declines to under half of all babies being breastfed by 6 months of age (Amir *et al*, 2010). Breastmilk is not associated with tooth decay and provides the most suitable form of nutrition and hydration for babies for around the first 6 months of life (NHMRC, 2012).

In Victoria, children of all ages are eating less than the recommended amount of fruit and vegetables, 39 per cent and 78 per cent of children are not consuming the recommended serves of fruit and vegetables respectively per day. A high proportion of two to 16 year olds were reported to obtain more than their recommended energy from sugars (Australian National Children's Nutrition and Physical activity Survey, 2007).

Foods and drinks containing added sugars should be limited, especially between meals. This is because frequent consumption of sweet foods, especially when eaten between meals, can contribute to tooth decay. Tooth decay develops when sugary foods interact with bacteria in the mouth and result in acid on tooth surfaces. This acid causes damage to the tooth enamel (refer to Baby teeth section on [page 12](#) for further information about the decay process).

### Did you know ...

there are many common foods that are promoted as healthy and natural which have high amounts of added sugar that can increase the risk of tooth decay.

## Age appropriate meals and snacks

Babies, toddlers and children who eat highly processed and sweet foods regularly and frequently throughout the day are at a high risk of tooth decay. The following table describes age appropriate meal and snack choices in detail and is based on the evidence and recommendations given in the Infant Feeding Guidelines and the Australian Dietary Guidelines. It is important that there is good communication between the service and families about feeding young children. Families are responsible for ensuring that they provide enough breastmilk or formula to last the day, and all decisions about introducing solid foods to babies should be clarified with families before foods are introduced.

### Age: Birth – 6 months

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|-------------------------|---|
| <b>Breastfed</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Babies should be exclusively breast fed until around six months of age when solid foods are introduced.</li> <li>- Exclusively breastfed infants do not require additional fluids up to six months of age.</li> <li>- Breastmilk is not associated with an increased risk of tooth decay.</li> <li>- Breastmilk is the most suitable form of nutrition and hydration for babies. It also has multiple benefits for the health and wellbeing of both mother and child (NHMRC, 2012).</li> </ul>                   |
| <b>Not breastfed</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- For babies that are not breastfed or are partially breastfed, commercial infant formula is the only safe and suitable alternative to meet nutrition needs.</li> <li>- For formula fed infants, cooled boiled tap water may be used if additional fluids are needed.</li> <li>- No other foods and drinks are suitable for babies less than 6 months.</li> <li>- Always prepare infant formula correctly according to the instructions and do not add anything else to the formula (e.g. rice cereal).</li> </ul> |
| <b>Meals and snacks</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No other foods or snacks are required for babies at this age.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Not recommended</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Solid foods (meals and snacks)</li> <li>- Sugar, honey, salt or any other flavourings and additives should not be added to baby's breast or formula milk.</li> <li>- If using a dummy, it should not be dipped in honey, sugar or any other substance.</li> </ul>  |

**Age: 6 – 12 months**

- Breastfed**
- Breastmilk should be the main drink until 12 months of age. Small amounts of cooled boiled tap water can supplement breastmilk as required.
  - Feeding bottles should only be used for breastmilk, infant formula or water.

- Not breastfed**
- For babies who are not breastfed, infant formula should be the main drink until 12 months of age.
  - Small amounts of cooled boiled tap water can supplement infant formula.
  - Between 6 and 12 months babies should transition from a feeding bottle to a cup.
  - Children can start learning to drink from a cup from around six months of age.
  - Discourage comfort sucking on a feeding bottle.
  - Always hold a child when feeding.
  - Avoid using a baby's bottle to settle a child to sleep.

- Meals and snacks**
- In consultation with families, introduce solid foods, in addition to breast or bottle feeding at around 6 months of age.
  - The introduction of solid foods into a child's diet is an important milestone in their development which begins from six months of age.
  - The first food to offer babies should be rich in iron (for example: infant cereal prepared with breastmilk or infant formula, pureed meat, poultry and fish, cooked tofu and legumes). Other foods such as vegetables, fruits, full-fat yoghurt, cheese and custard can then be added.
  - Between 6 and 12 months the texture and consistency of the food should shift from finely mashed, to lumpy and finger foods and eventually to similar foods that the family eats.
  - Babies should be introduced to a wide variety of foods as recommended in the Infant Feeding Guidelines.
  - Highly processed sugary foods should not be provided to babies. Avoiding these foods will decrease the risk of tooth decay, as well as setting up healthy eating habits for life.
  - Other foods that can be introduced before 12 months include: Cooked or raw vegetables (hard, small round and/or stick solid foods are not recommended because they can cause choking. Food with a high risk of choking include whole nuts, seeds, raw carrot, celery sticks and chunks of apple).
  - Fruit / whole egg / cereals / bread / pasta / nut pastes such as peanut butter / toast fingers and rusks / dairy foods such as full-fat cheese, custards and yoghurt.
  - To prevent botulism do not feed honey to infants aged under 12 months.

- Not recommended**
- Sugar, honey, salt or any other flavourings and additives should not be added to baby's first solid foods.
  - It's important to remember that young children are at risk of choking on small hard objects up until the age of 3 years. Foods such as hard pieces of carrot and apple should be grated or cooked to prevent choking. Some foods are also unsafe for babies and toddlers (children under 3 years) to eat due to them being a choking hazard (some examples include nuts, chocolate coated nuts, lollies, jubes and candies).
  - Cow's milk should not be given as a main drink to infants under the age of 12 months (though small quantities may be given as part of solid foods such as custards and on cereal).

**Age: 12 months and beyond**

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|-------------------------|---|
| <b>Breastfed</b>        | - Breastfeeding should be continued beyond 12 months of age for as long as mother and child desire.   |
| <b>Not breastfed</b>    | - A feeding bottle is not needed for a child older than 12 months of age. From 12 months water and plain cow's milk should be the main drinks for children and offered in a cup.  |
| <b>Meals and snacks</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Toddlers should be eating foods consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines and similar to the rest of the family.</li> <li>- Fruit and vegetables are an important part of healthy eating. In line with the Australian Dietary Guidelines, a wide variety of nutritious foods should be consumed every day from the five food groups:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Vegetables/legumes</li> <li>2. Fruits</li> <li>3. Grain foods</li> <li>4. Lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans</li> <li>5. Milk, yoghurt cheese and/or their alternatives.</li> </ol> </li> </ul>  |
| <b>Not recommended</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sugar, honey, salt or any other flavourings should not be added to toddler's foods and snacks.</li> <li>- Toddlers should also not be given foods that are high in saturated fat, added sugar and/or added salt such as cakes, lollies and crisps.</li> <li>- Processed foods can contain more sugar. When buying processed foods, check the nutrition label for the amount of sugar. Four grams of sugar is equal to 1 teaspoon.</li> <li>- Fresh and home prepared rather than processed or take away foods helps to control how much sugar children are getting.</li> <li>- Remember that dried fruits such as sultanas, apricots and apples have had most of the water removed in the drying process. This means they have high concentrations of sugar compared to fresh fruit. Consume in small amounts.</li> <li>- Foods with a high risk of choking (e.g. whole nuts, seeds, raw carrot, celery sticks, chunks of apple) should be avoided. Suitable alternatives to these foods are nut pastes and nut spreads, cooked carrot, grated apple.</li> </ul> |

**Did you know ...**  
 offering regular healthy meals and snacks throughout the day is important. If children are hungry outside of set meal times, always provide a healthy snack such as a piece of fresh fruit, a sandwich or a piece of cheese together with a glass of water.

## How to promote healthy eating

As an early childhood educator you play a key role in encouraging children and families to establish healthy eating habits from an early age. Good nutrition is essential for the overall health and wellbeing of children and sets them up for good eating habits into adulthood.

### Challenges, Myths and Barriers to promoting healthy eating

There are some common challenges that early childhood educators and families may face when promoting healthy eating for babies, toddlers and children such as:

- Children may have a preference for sweet/sugary foods and snacks (fussy eating and food refusal).
- Families may provide sweet foods and snacks for their children at your service or at home.
- Sweet foods and snacks are advertised as healthy, natural, organic, low fat or without added sugar (for example some breakfast cereals and muesli bars) which may be misleading.
- Big food corporations market and advertise, sponsor children's activities and promote their products to children and families.
- Misunderstandings about age appropriate foods and snacks: the types, amounts and frequency.
- Celebrations are often association with treat foods. In children's services when celebrations are frequent this can conflict with healthy eating policies.
- Fundraising activities often involving selling sweet foods. Using these methods to fundraise can conflict with healthy eating policies.
- Peer pressure encourages unhealthy meals and snacks from home.

To help you address these we have provided intentional learning opportunities (curriculum), everyday learning opportunities (routine) and suggested policy areas.

You can help support families to continue healthy habits at home so that babies, toddlers and children are consistently consuming healthy meals and snacks, whether at your service or at home. Encourage parents through meaningful and supportive discussions, family engagement activities and take home resources and materials such as newsletters and factsheets.

Finally, we show how the activity can contribute to your service in meeting the common benchmarks for early childhood education services; National Quality Standard, Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework and the Healthy Together Achievement Program healthy eating and oral health benchmark.

