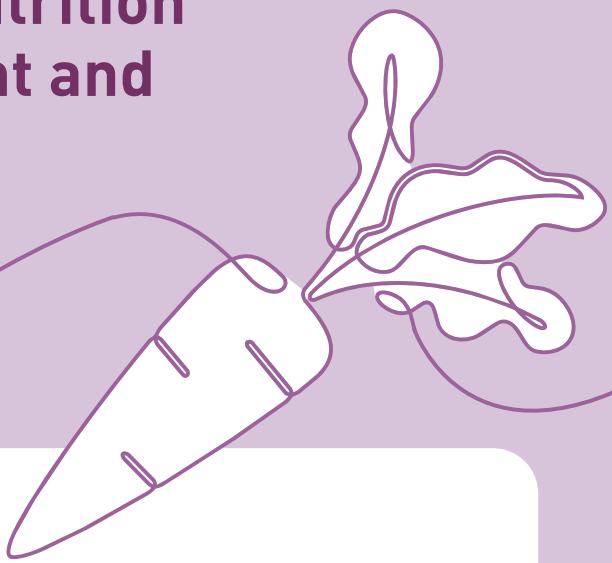
The Importance of Optimal Nutrition and Child Health, Development and Wellbeing

The early childhood years are one of the most remarkable and important windows for human growth and development.



The food children receive during this time nourishes their growing bodies and minds, shapes their relationship with food, and lays foundations for a lifetime of health and wellbeing.

"During the first two years, an infant must transition from a milk-based diet to consuming foods from the family table. What a child is fed at this time is critical for optimal growth and development. Nutrient or energy deficits during this period may lead to impaired growth and cognitive development and increased disease risk."

– Netting MJ, Moumin NA, Makrides M, Green TJ. The Australian Feeding Infants and Toddlers Study (OzFITS) 2021: Highlights and Future Directions. Nutrients. 2022;14(20).

Seven reasons why meeting children's nutritional needs matters

1	**Brain development**	A child's brain grows faster in the first five years of life than at any other point. Nourishing food and drinks directly contribute to this developmental process.
2	**Physical growth**	This is the most visible part – height, weight, bones, and teeth. Energy and protein drive overall growth, many other nutrients play an important role (for example, calcium and vitamin D build the skeleton; iron keeps blood healthy). A child who is getting enough of these nutrients will grow strongly and be physically ready for school. For children aged two to eight, the rate of growth is still rapid, and what they eat directly shapes it.
3	**Cognitive development**	Building a brain (point 1) is different from how well it works day to day. This is about function: a child's ability to concentrate, follow instructions, manage their feelings, and take in new information. Iron deficiency, even without obvious signs, is associated with difficulties with attention and learning. Iodine deficiency affects thinking and development.
4	**Preventing short-term nutrient deficiencies**	Young children have small stomachs, strong opinions about food, and variable appetites, which means gaps in their diet can happen easily and quickly. Many young Australian children do not consume enough vegetables. Discretionary foods can replace intake of key food groups – so providing a variety of foods from the core food groups is important.

5 Meeting energy needs for play and learning	Relative to their size, young children need a lot of energy. Running, climbing, concentrating, and managing a full day in a busy environment all draw on the same energy supply. A child who arrives at activities hungry is not just tired: they are less able to engage/connect, participate, and learn. Regular meals that include a good variety of food groups keep children going across the whole day.
6 Hydration	The importance of having enough water to drink is often underestimated. Children's bodies are more sensitive to dehydration than adults', and even mild dehydration affects mood, concentration, and physical performance. Plain tap water, offered freely throughout the day, is the right choice for children over 12 months. For infants under 12 months, breastmilk or formula meets all fluid needs; small amounts of cooled boiled water can be offered from around six months.
7 Building lifelong health	The first five years are different from every other period of life, including adulthood. Adult dietary guidelines are largely about managing health risks. Guidelines for young children focus on giving children the best possible start so that those risks are lower to begin with. The food young children eat shapes their nutrient status, their health over time, their food preferences for years to come, and their ability to learn. What is provided to children today is an investment in who these children will be as adults.

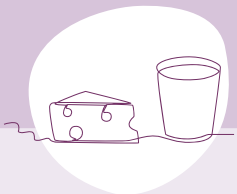
Dietary patterns in young children where professional support may be helpful

There are some nutrients that are very important for child development, for example:



Iron

Commonly found in lean red meat, poultry, eggs, legumes, iron-fortified cereals



Calcium

Commonly found in dairy and calcium-fortified dairy alternatives



Unsaturated fats

Commonly found in olive/canola oil, avocado, nut butter/paste, eggs, oily fish



Fibre

Commonly found in vegetables and legumes, fruit, wholegrain pasta, bread, etc

The dietary patterns of some children might need more attention to make sure they are getting enough of these particular nutrients. For example, a vegetarian or vegan diet can meet a young child's needs, but needs to be well-planned and may require support from a dietitian. The same applies where a child has a dairy allergy or uses dairy alternatives, which need to be fortified with calcium.

If a family is worried that their child is eating only a very small range of foods over a long period, or has questions about how their child is growing, talking with a child health nurse, a GP or a dietitian is the best next step. Discussing these concerns with educators can also be helpful, and they may be able to support discussions with health professionals.

This information has been sourced from the Best Practice Guide for Early Childhood Education and Care Food Environment.

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