



Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1 to 4 year olds and Children's Food Pyramid Rationale



1.0 Introduction

The Healthy Ireland Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1-4 years and Children's Food Pyramid are the policy tools used to define the government recommendations on healthy eating and a balanced diet for this age group. This toolkit has been developed by the Department of Health, together with key partners and aims to support Dietitians, Health Care Professionals and managers of preschools, creches and Early Learning and Care Centres on how to best to provide healthy food choices for young children at this essential stage in their development.

The evidence base for this rationale comes primarily from the *Scientific Recommendations for Food-Based Dietary Guidelines for 1 to 5 Year-Olds in Ireland*, a report from the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) provided to the Department of Health. To view or download a copy of the report visit www.fsai.ie/Dietary_Recommendations_1-5_Year_Olds/

2.0 Context

The *Obesity Policy and Action Plan - A Healthy Weight for Ireland (2016-2025)* calls for the development of a suite of healthy eating guidelines for the general population. In 2016, the Department launched Healthy Food for Life, the revised Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid for adults, teenagers and children aged 5 years and over.

These new Healthy Eating Guidelines and Children's Food Pyramid for 1-4 year olds represent the realisation of a further action in the Obesity Policy and Action Plan, as well as a key action in *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*.

The Department of Health established an Obesity Policy Implementation Oversight Group (OPIOG) in 2017 and later a Sub Group on Healthy Eating. Its first objective was to develop population Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1-4 year olds and a young Children's Food Pyramid. The Department requested the FSAI Scientific Committee to provide scientific recommendations to help guide this process.

A key requirement in developing national healthy lifestyle guidelines is that it represents a consensus of all the major stakeholders, so that health professionals and the general public get a clear, consistent message. To help ensure this the Healthy Eating Sub Group includes representatives from key government departments and stakeholders from the main organisations working on population nutrition in Ireland.

Children's Food Pyramid
A guide for children aged 1-4
For more information visit www.gov.ie/healthyireland

Foods and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt
Maximum once a week and in TINY amounts
These foods can be linked to childhood obesity.

Food Category	Ages one and two	Ages three and four
Fats, spreads and oils	Use small amounts	Use small amounts
Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts	2 Servings a day	3-4 Servings a day
Milk, yogurt and cheese	3 Servings a day	3 Servings a day
Vegetables, salad and fruit	2-3 Servings a day	4-5 Servings a day
Cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice	3-4 Servings a day	4-6 Servings a day

Serving Guide One serving is:

- Breakfast cereals:** 1 heaped spoon on cereal or oatmeal or porridge instead of fruit
- Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts:** 30g cooked beef, lamb or pork, chicken, turkey or fish • 1 medium egg • 20g cooked portion fish • 20g hummus • 150g (100g) low added sugar baked beans, peas, lentils or chick peas • 1 heaped teaspoon (12g) peanut or nut butter
- Milk, yogurt and cheese:** 200ml or 200g full-fat milk • 1 part (125g) yogurt • 2 small pots (40g) plain fromage frais
- Vegetables, salad and fruit:** 1 small fruit such as a plum, pear or mandarin • 1 medium sized fruit like an orange, an apple, a pear or a banana • 1-2 tomatoes or grapes cut in quarters • 2-4 cooked vegetable sticks • 2-4 cucumber sticks • 100ml unsweetened orange juice • 150g (100g) homemade or ready-made vegetable soup • 2-4 cherry tomatoes cut in quarters
- Cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice:** 20g dry pasta • 20g instant noodles • 150g (100g) oatmeal • 150g (100g) wholemeal bread • 1 slice of bread • 100g (100g) small soft roll • 150g (100g) porridge • 150g (100g) instant porridge • 1 rice cake • 1-2 small breadsticks • 100g (100g) cornflakes • 200g (100g) sweet potato or peas • 150g (100g) peas, rice, noodles or couscous

Try to use child-size plates and bowls

- Child's Plate: 200ml
- Adult Plate: 300ml
- Child's Bowl: 100ml
- Adult Bowl: 150ml

Breastfeeding is recommended in Ireland until children are 2 years of age or beyond.

Vitamin D Children aged 1 to 4 need to take 9 micrograms (9µg) of vitamin D daily, 5 days a week every day from September to the end of October.

Drinks Water, breastmilk and milk are the drink recommendation for your children.

Source: Department of Health/Health Service Executive 2020.

3.0 The FSAI report recommendations

The FSAI report outlines food based dietary guideline recommendations for 1 to 5 year-old children living in Ireland. The latest Irish research on the dietary habits of this age group was used by the FSAI's Scientific Committee to develop these guidelines, which reflect international best practice on young child feeding in an Irish context. It is the first time a national scientific report addresses the nutritional needs of toddlers and pre-school children living in Ireland. These guidelines cover the gap in Irish scientific dietary recommendations for the post-infancy period – a phase that starts on their 1st birthday and ends at age 5 years, when the general population healthy eating recommendations begin to apply.

Children in this age group are at a development stage, where their increasing wish is to make their own decisions about what they eat, and this can be challenging. It is well known that dietary habits which can last for a lifetime are formed during this critical phase. Toddlers and pre-schoolers have very high nutritional requirements relative to their size, so there is a real need to focus on the quality of food rather than quantity.

3.1 Key scientific recommendations from the FSAI report include:

- Milk is a key food, with a daily intake of 550ml of cow's milk, or equivalent amounts of yogurt or cheese, recommended.
- Water and milk are the only drinks recommended for this age group. Sugar-containing and acidic drinks should be limited and, if consumed at all, should be kept to mealtimes.
- Parents and guardians are warned against using some beverages such as almond 'milk', coconut 'milk' and rice 'milk', as milk substitutes as these are nutritionally inadequate. If a plant-based beverage is required to replace cow's milk, a soya 'milk', can be used, provided it is fortified with nutrients, particularly calcium.
- A portion of vegetables should always be included at the main meal, together with the number of small portions of salad, vegetables or fruit that match the age of the child, for example two small portions for a two year old, four small portions for a four year old (the portion size given should fit into the child's hand so that smaller children are given less and bigger children more).
- Lean red meat (about 30g) is recommended three days a week for iron and other essential minerals in addition to protein. On other days, red meat can be replaced with poultry, fish, eggs, beans or lentils which also provide iron, as well as protein and minerals. Smooth nut butters also provide protein.
- A combination of both white and wholemeal breads, cereals, potatoes, pastas and rice will provide adequate fibre and are important sources of calories.
- Foods high in fat, sugar or salt such as confectionery, cakes, crisps, biscuits and sugar-coated breakfast cereals are not recommended. There is very little room for such foods in a 1 to 5 year-old's diet, so such foods either overwhelm the child's capacity for nutritious foods or provide additional calories that lead to the development of overweight or obesity.
- Fats, spreads and oils should be used minimally.
- During the extended winter months – from Halloween to St Patrick's Day, all children aged 1 to 5 years need to be given a low-dose (5 µg) vitamin D-only supplement to make up for lack of skin synthesis of this vitamin from sunlight.
- Young children aged 1 to 3 years, who are naturally small (25th percentile or less on growth charts) need extra iron, which can be taken as an iron-fortified full-fat milk, or a low-dose iron supplement.
- Encouraging acceptance of the wide range of flavours and textures naturally found in the food people need for healthy eating throughout life is important at this young life stage. Fostering a tolerance to 'try' an expanding variety of vegetables, salads, fruits, meat, fish and wholemeal cereals helps children develop a taste for nutritious foods. To assist this, small amounts of sugar can be used e.g. in stewed fruit, milk puddings, in jam on wholemeal bread or as a small portion of ice cream on fruit etc.
- If a key food group is excluded from a child's diet because a food allergy is suspected without proper indication or appropriate professional advice being sought, the growth and development of a child can be compromised.

These recommendations were developed by the FSAI's Scientific Committee by modelling over 2,500 daily meal patterns made up of foods commonly eaten by 1 to 5-year old children in Ireland (consumed by more than 10% of children in the Irish National Pre-School Nutrition Survey). Vegetarian patterns were also modelled. Data from a questionnaire and a focused discussion involving paediatric and community dietitians working specifically with this age group provided additional information.

Dietary intake targets were identified for energy, macronutrients (protein, carbohydrate, sugar, dietary fibre, fat, saturated fat, docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA)) and six key micronutrients (vitamin A, vitamin D, calcium, iron, iodine and zinc). The dietary modelling was informed by healthy eating principles and considered girls and boys at five percentiles based on World Health Organization growth charts for six age groups (1 year, 1.5 years, 2 years, 3 years, 4 years and 5 years).

4.0 Developing the Healthy Ireland Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1-4 years and Children's Food Pyramid

At this age young children are progressing from a predominantly milk based diet to sharing in the family diet. Therefore, a healthy family diet that recognises that small children have small tummies and need to follow child-size portion size recommendations is crucial in maintaining growth and development as well as encouraging positive lifestyles generally.

The Healthy Eating Guidelines and Children's Food Pyramid describe how to build a healthy diet, for different age groups: 1 year, 2 years, 3 years and 4 years. A toolkit of resources (see 5.0) is available to support the Irish parents, health care professionals and preschool and creche managers to make choices that add up to an overall healthy eating pattern, that combines healthy choices from across all food groups, while paying attention to portion sizes also and in particular allowing only TINY amounts of high fat, salt and sugar foods from the Red Triangle at the top of the Children's Food Pyramid.

4.1 Key consumer messages for 1-4 year olds

The FSAI scientific recommendations were translated into the following key consumer messages by the Healthy Eating Sub Group.

1. Healthy eating habits can last a lifetime

This age is the perfect age to teach your child healthy eating habits for life. Lead by example. If you eat a variety of healthy foods, your child will be more likely to do the same.

2. Small tummies need small servings

1 to 4 year old children have small tummies. They can only eat small amounts. Offer them 3 small meals and 2 to 3 healthy snacks every day. All of their food and drink needs to be nourishing.

3. Portion size matters

Be guided by your child's appetite. Use it to help you decide how much food to offer them. Follow the Children's Food Pyramid guide to servings for portion sizes.

4. Milk is a key food

Milk is a key food in the diets of 1 to 4 year old children. Offer your child three servings of milk, yogurt or cheese every day.

5. Limit 'treat' foods

Foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt can be linked to being overweight in childhood. If you decide to give your child these foods offer them in TINY amounts and only once a week.

6. Offer water and milk as drinks

Avoid sugary drinks like some cordials and fizzy drinks. Sugary drinks are not good for your child's teeth.

7. Have a regular daily routine

Having regular times for meals and snacks sets up healthy eating habits for life, like starting every day with a healthy breakfast.

8. More vitamin D needed in winter months

Young children don't get enough Vitamin D in winter. They need 5 micrograms vitamin D only (drops or liquid) every day from Halloween (31st October) to St Patrick's Day (17th March).

9. Make sure your child gets enough iron

Offer your child red meat three times a week and choose breakfast cereals with added iron (12mg/100g) most days of the week. 1-3 year olds who are small for their age may need extra iron so talk to a health professional for advice.

In addition to the scientific recommendations in their report, FSAI also provided the Department with a range of meal plans for different age points which facilitated the development of the Children's Food Pyramid and the sample meal plan guides.

5.0 The Healthy Eating Guidelines and Children's Food Pyramid Toolkit

A range of new resources has been developed to help translate the Children's Food Pyramid into daily food choices. The toolkit or suite of resources is primarily aimed at parents of young children but there are also some resources for healthcare professionals and creche managers. They include:

- A 24 page booklet
- Poster – Health professional/creche manager
- Poster – parent
- Shelf fact sheets x 6 – 1 on each shelf of the Children's Food Pyramid
- Happy Healthy Meals fact sheet
- Tips for Fussy Eaters
- Vitamin D fact sheet
- Iron fact sheet
- Breakfast fact sheet
- Snacks fact sheet
- Drinks fact sheet
- Sample Meal plan x 5 - 1 for each year of age and 3 yr old vegetarian
- Adult and child Plate comparison infographic
- Meal plan options (Health professional/creche manager)
- Q+A
- Rationale for health care professionals
- Powerpoint presentation for training

A web resource with assets such as imagery and downloads will also be shared with partners

To view and download the Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1-4 year olds and the Children's Food Pyramid resources visit www.gov.ie/healthyireland

Further information is available also on www.mychild.ie and www.makeastart.ie

6.0 Members of the OPIOG Healthy Eating Sub Group

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*These members were also on the Technical Working Group for the 1-4 year olds Healthy Eating Guidelines and Children's Food Pyramid

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