



# Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1 to 4 year olds and Children's Food Pyramid Questions and Answers



## Why is the Department of Health publishing Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1 to 4 year olds?

The Department of Health (DoH) develops and keeps under review dietary recommendations for different age groups as part of its role in promoting evidence based public health. No dietary guidelines for 1 to 4-year olds existed so the Department of Health have developed these. The development of healthy eating guidelines for the general population is also called for by the *Obesity Policy and Action Plan - A Healthy Weight for Ireland (2016-2025)* and is an action in the *'First 5 :: A Whole-of- Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028.'*

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 2020, a report from the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) provided to the Department of Health. To view the report go to [https://www.fsai.ie/Dietary\\_Recommendations\\_1-5\\_Year\\_Olds/](https://www.fsai.ie/Dietary_Recommendations_1-5_Year_Olds/)

## Who are the guidelines for?

The Department of Health has translated the FSAI scientific recommendations into practical population-based Healthy Eating Guidelines and the Children's Food Pyramid for healthy 1-4-year-old children. This work was supported by the Health Service Executive, **safe food**, FSAI and the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute.

The guidelines are for any parent, child minder or creche owner who is feeding healthy 1 to 4 year olds.

## Why have we a Children's Food Pyramid that looks like the Food Pyramid for adults, teenagers and children 5 years and older?

At age one year milk is still the main food group a child consumes. Throughout the period between 1 to 4 years parents and child minders are gradually moving their child's diet towards that in the main Food Pyramid. The food shelves are the same across the two Food Pyramids, but the child-serving sizes and number of servings differ across ages and the cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice shelf is at the bottom, because 4 year olds need the most servings from this shelf.

## Should milk, yogurt and cheese be the bottom of the shelf?

These foods still make up a big part of 1 to 4 year-olds' diets. Throughout these 4 years of life children need the equivalent of 600ml of milk. While the amount of this food shelf remains the same, the nutritional need for foods from most other food groups increases as children grow older.

## Are high fibre foods such as wholemeal or wholegrain varieties of breads, pasta or rice suitable?

Young children should eat a variety of white and wholegrain breads and cereals to meet their fibre needs. While the DoH advises children aged 5 and over to have mostly wholegrain varieties, too many wholegrain choices can fill up small tummies and not leave enough room for other healthy foods needed for growth and development. Therefore a mix of white and wholegrain is recommended. If a child is prone to constipation, more wholemeal and wholegrain varieties should be included in the diet together with vegetables, fruit and plenty of fluids.

## Separating the Top Shelf from the lower shelves

The separation of the Top Shelf or the Red Triangle of the Children's Food Pyramid from the lower shelves is to make clear that foods and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt are not needed for good health. They will overwhelm the capacity for foods young children need to help them grow and develop. If these foods are offered they need to be limited to TINY amounts only and once a week.

## Can low fat varieties of dairy foods be given at this age group?

Full fat milk should be given for children aged 1 to 2 years and low fat milk can be given to children aged 3-4 years. Skimmed milk is not suitable for children under 5 years of age.

## When a child is small for their age and the amounts of foods recommended seem a lot – what should a parent do?

The amount of food a young child eats varies from day to day and meal to meal depending upon their needs. Many serving sizes are suggested as a range- this is because smaller, younger children will eat less and taller, older children and children who are more active will eat more. If your child is small for their age, offer servings from the lower range, i.e. where it says half to one slice of bread, offer half a slice. It is important to use your child's appetite to help you decide how much food you should give them. Feeding children frequently throughout the day with small meals and healthy snacks is important.

## Is unsweetened orange juice good for young children?

Orange juice is rich in Vitamin C and when taken together with an iron containing breakfast cereal, it helps the body absorb the iron. Iron is an important nutrient for young children. Limit orange juice to 100ml unsweetened juice a day and give this at the same time as iron-fortified breakfast cereal. It is best to offer children whole fruits such as mandarin segments and berries to provide vitamin C.

## Why are serving size details sometimes in grams on the Children's Food Pyramid Guide?

Where possible the servings are given in household measurements or in palm of hand and thumbs measurements as tested for the regular Food Pyramid hand. These include:

- Half a cup of cooked rice and pasta (1 cup is 200ml)
- A serving size of vegetables and fruit is the equivalent of what can fit into half the size of an adult's palm.
- Two adult thumbs of cheddar cheese.
- 30g or 1/3 of the palm of an adult's hand as a guide for a serving of meat, poultry, fish or tofu.

The complex Children's Food Pyramid A3 poster aimed at Health Care Professionals carries measurements in grams.

## What are the key messages?

### 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.

### 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

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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).

### 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.

## What is the Children's Food Pyramid?

It is a visual representation of how different foods and drinks can be combined to contribute towards a healthy balanced diet. The Children's Food Pyramid organises foods and drinks into 5 main shelves, starting from the bottom:

<p><b>Cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice</b></p> <p>3 to 4 servings for children aged 1 and 2 4 to 6 servings for children aged 3 and 4</p> <p>These starchy foods provide energy and fibre. They also provide some B vitamins which are needed to convert food into energy. Offer at least one of these foods at every meal.</p>
<p><b>Vegetables, salad and fruit</b></p> <p>2 to 3 servings for children aged 1 and 2 4 to 5 portions for children aged 3 and 4</p> <p>These foods provide vitamins, minerals and fibre. Offer vegetables, salad or fruit chopped into small servings at every meal and as snacks.</p>
<p><b>Milk, yogurt and cheese</b></p> <p>3 servings a day for children aged 1 to 4</p> <p>These foods provide calcium for healthy bones and teeth. Giving milk as a drink with meals is an easy way to get one of the three daily servings.</p>
<p><b>Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts</b></p> <p>2 servings a day for children aged 1 and 2 3 to 4 servings for children aged 3 and 4</p> <p>These foods provide protein and iron for growth and development. Beef, lamb and pork contain iron and should be offered 3 times a week.</p>
<p><b>Fats, spreads and oils</b></p> <p>In very small amounts</p> <p>Use as little as possible. Fats, spreads and oils provide essential fats in your child's diet. Only use very small amounts of these foods, for example, 1 teaspoon of spread on bread and oven-bake or grill foods instead of frying.</p>

## You mentioned 5 main shelves, what about the 6th shelf?

The Red Triangle at the top contains food and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt. These are NOT needed for health or for keeping children at a healthy weight. Sweets, chocolate, biscuits, cakes, fizzy drinks or crisps should not be a part of your child's daily diet. Having foods and drinks from this shelf spoils your child's appetite for more nutritious food.

If you do decide to give your child these foods offer them in TINY amounts and only once a week.

## Why are high-fat, sugar and salt foods still included if they are not needed for a healthy balanced diet?

It is clearly communicated in the Children's Food Pyramid that these foods and drinks are high in fat, sugar and salt and are not needed for good health. The Red Triangle foods and drinks shelf is separated from the rest of the Pyramid to illustrate this.

The Red Triangle is included in the Children's Food Pyramid to provide guidance on these foods which are poor in essential nutrients. While ideally these foods should be avoided, realistically including these foods in TINY amounts and only once a week or less ensures the child's diet remains healthy overall.

## What resources are available for consumers and how can these help to interpret the Children's Food Pyramid and Healthy Eating Guidelines?

The resource pack includes a suite of materials, primarily aimed at parents of young children, but there are also some resources for healthcare professionals and creche managers. These are:

- 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.

To view and download these resources visit [www.gov.ie/healthy\\_ireland](http://www.gov.ie/healthy_ireland)

### If it is a Food Pyramid, why does it include notes about water and exercise?

While food is very important, it is only one element of a healthy lifestyle. To maintain a healthy weight children need to play and be active for at least 60 minutes every day.

To keep children hydrated it's important they drink fluids regularly throughout the day – water and milk are best and the most tooth-friendly drinks.

### Children of this age can be really fussy, what do you recommend?

Fussy, faddy or picky eating is a phase when your child doesn't eat well or refuses to eat. To help support parents we have a Guide on Tips for fussy eaters and a Guide on Happy, Healthy Mealtimes visit [www.gov.ie/healthy\\_ireland](http://www.gov.ie/healthy_ireland)

### How have you tested this Children's Food Pyramid to ensure people understand it?

The Department of Health commissioned research through IPSOS MRBI to test the understandability of the Children's Food Pyramid. Focus groups were held with parents, healthcare professionals and creche managers to ensure that the messages are clear and delivered in a way that is realistic, reliable and applicable to all users.