

# Mealtimes

Meal and snack times are an important part of the day for infants and toddlers. Children are learning about their bodies and developing new skills that build confidence, trust, and lifelong healthy eating habits.

## Stage 1 (Birth to around 3 months)

### I am:

- breastfeeding and/or bottle-feeding to get nutrition.
- learning how to use movements and facial expressions to let you know when I'm hungry or full.

*When possible, breastfeeding is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics for a minimum of one year.*



## Stage 2 (3 to around 6 months)

### I am:

- experimenting with tastes of semi-solid foods, with a physician's approval.
- eager to "help" feed myself.
- very curious about what others are eating, but I may or may not try it.

*Responding to an infant's emotional needs by feeding them will confuse hunger with emotional experiences. They will learn to eat when sad, lonely, frustrated, or angry.*

### My caregivers help me by:

- providing a place for my mom to breast- and bottle-feed.
- learning the best ways to store and prepare breast milk.
- learning to read my signals when I am hungry, bored, sad, or angry, and responding appropriately.
- feeding me when I'm hungry, and responding when I show that I am full.
- holding me and giving me all your attention when I'm bottle-feeding.
- offering solid food when I'm ready and the doctor says it's okay.
- looking to see if my tongue is down when you offer solid foods. You should not be able to see the underside of my tongue.
- planning feeding times based on my culture and needs.
- offering me a cup and utensils so I can practice. This helps keep my hands busy too!

*Children go through many changes in their feeding skills and nutritional needs during the first year. Babies start by learning to get semi-solid food from a spoon and swallow it. They then learn to manipulate and gum thicker, lumpier food. Finally, they learn to pick up and chew pieces of soft, cooked food.*

### Stage 3 (6 to around 12 months)

#### I am:

- getting much of my nutrition from a variety of solid foods.
- very interested in what others around me are eating.
- starting to like certain foods.
- exploring safe finger foods on my own, when I'm ready.
- exploring a variety of foods to eat with my fingers.

*A child is ready for finger foods when they show interest, have head and neck control, can move their tongue sideways or make a bowl shape, can move their jaw in all directions, and can successfully bring items and hands to their mouth.*



### Stage 4 (12 to around 24 months)

#### I am:

- starting to drink from a cup without a lid.
- beginning to talk about the foods I eat.
- very busy. I may not want to eat very much at every meal.
- letting my caregivers know when I am hungry and full.
- choosing what I want to eat when I have options.
- exploring how to use a fork and a spoon, but I still enjoy eating with my fingers.



#### My caregivers help me by:

- offering safe finger foods when I am ready, such as ready-to-eat cereals that easily dissolve, and pieces of soft fruits and vegetables.
- providing a low table and chair for me to sit at while I eat.
- offering 3 to 4 choices of nutritious foods for me to explore.
- keeping my food portions small, and just right for me. Give me lots of chances to have seconds.
- allowing me to practice feeding myself with my fingers and child-sized utensils.
- keeping a simple chart of what and how much I eat every day.
- joining me at mealtime and modeling eating new foods that are different colors, textures, shapes, sizes, and temperatures.
- including regular meal and snack times in my routine.

*Avoid forcing a certain type or amount of food at mealtimes. The more casual and confident the caregiver is about mealtimes, the better.*

*Children tend to pick one hearty meal per day. Keeping a routine time for snacks and meals can help improve daily nutrition.*

## Stage 5 (24 to around 36 months)

### I am:

- moving all day long, so I am hungry and thirsty more often.
- independent and eager to help at mealtime.
- feeding myself. I can turn my spoon so more food gets into my mouth, and I can use a fork too!
- still using my fingers with slippery foods.
- starting to serve myself when I am given serving utensils to use.
- able to lift, drink, and hold a cup in one hand.
- using my new words to talk about and ask for my favorite foods.
- mostly eating my favorite foods. I may refuse to eat different foods.
- interested in whole foods that are not cut up: whole beans, apples, bananas, corn on the cob, etc.



### My caregivers help me by:

- offering a regular routine that includes healthy snacks and meals.
- making water available all day.
- helping me serve myself by putting food in serving bowls with serving utensils that are my size and easy to use, and giving me space to practice.
- sitting, eating, and talking with me at snack and meal time.
- providing a place for me if there is a grown-up table. Add a secured booster chair that I can climb into by myself.
- respecting my food preferences. I will eat better if my caregiver accepts my preferences instead of combating them.
- offering foods in sizes and shapes that do not present a choking hazard.

*Make mealtime fun and exciting by using songs, fun food labels, and colorful foods. Mealtime fun will provide a good start for lifelong healthy eating.*

- offering 2 or 3 choices during mealtime that include an old favorite and something new.
- including me when preparing food. When I help with washing, sorting, and preparing the food, I may be more willing to eat it.
- using snack time to balance my nutrition instead of filling me up. Create fun labels for super snack foods. For instance, carrots can be nicknamed “Super Vision Sticks” and avocado can be “Go-Go Avocado.”
- limiting boxed or canned foods with added sugar or salt.
- limiting sugary foods and replacing them with sweet whole foods like fruit and sweet veggies.

*To find out more about mealtimes, view the Resources and References found at the end of these materials.*