



Healthy drinks from the start

Nutritious drinks during the first five years of a child's life can set them on a path for healthy growth and development. There are many drink options for children, but new recommendations from some of the leading children's health and nutrition groups now offer clear advice about what children should drink. While each child is different, these general guidelines can help children develop healthy habits now that will carry into the future.

Water and milk are the best drinks for children. They help children stay hydrated, and milk provides nutrients like protein, calcium, and vitamin D that are important for development of bones and teeth. Depending on the child's age, milk can include breast milk, infant formula, cow's milk, or plain, fortified soy milk.

Children do not need fruit juice. Instead, when possible, encourage children to eat fresh, canned, or frozen whole fruits that do not have added sugars. Whole fruit provides more nutrition and can be more satisfying than 100 percent fruit juice. If you choose to offer juice, check the food label to make sure it is 100 percent fruit juice and stick within the recommended limits for a child's age.

All children should avoid sugar-sweetened drinks. These drinks lack nutrients to support children's growth. The added sugars can lead to dental cavities, and if consumed too much, lead to weight gain. Examples of drinks to avoid include flavored milks, toddler milks or formulas, soda, fruit drinks, sports drinks, tea, coffee, energy drinks, "diet" or "light" drinks sweetened with low-calorie sweeteners, and plant-based/nondairy milks other than fortified soy milk. By reducing children's exposure to these sweet tastes, you may help them prefer less sweet drinks and food later in life.

Specific recommendations for what and how much to drink depend on a child's age.

0 – 6 months: Babies only need breast milk or infant formula. Avoid other drinks.

6 – 12 months: Babies still need mostly breast milk or infant formula. Once they start to eat solid foods, begin to offer sips of water from a cup at meals. This may add up to a half to 1 cup throughout the day. Avoid juice and other drinks.

12 – 24 months: Toddlers need 1 to 4 cups of water each day. Now is the time to introduce plain, pasteurized whole cow's milk. Depending how much food a child eats, they may need 2 to 3 cups of milk each day. Toddlers do not need 100 percent juice, but if you offer it, limit it to no more than half a cup per day.

2 – 3 years: Children need 1 to 4 cups of water and 2 cups of milk each day. Swap whole milk with lower-fat milk like skim (nonfat) or 1 percent milk. Children do not need 100 percent juice, but if you offer it, limit it to no more than half a cup per day.

4 – 5 years: Water and low-fat milk are the best drinks for children. Children need 1 1/2 to 5 cups of water and up to 2 1/2 cups of low-fat milk per day. If you offer children 100 percent juice, limit it to no more than three-quarters of a cup per day.

You can learn more about the types and amounts of drinks for children at HealthyDrinksHealthyKids.org.

Reference:

Healthy Eating Research. (2019, September). *Healthy beverage consumption in early childhood: Recommendations from key national health and nutrition organizations* (Consensus statement). Retrieved from <https://healthydrinkshealthykids.org/app/uploads/2019/09/HER-HealthyBeverage-ConsensusStatement.pdf>

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