

Healthier catering tips for children's menus

Guidance for restaurants on providing healthier children's menu's
PDF

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Healthier eating is becoming more important to customers. Here are some practical suggestions to give children healthier options when they eat out. This will help children learn to choose foods which are good for them and to eat more healthily. You may already be achieving several of these tips but be prepared to go further and make real changes.

Fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetables are good sources of vitamins, minerals and fibre. To ensure children can eat their 5 a day, all main meals should include at least one portion of vegetables and/or fruit as standard (at least 40g). These can be fresh, frozen or canned.

- experiment with different presentations of colourful vegetables for example, serve veggie sticks with a sandwich or with a dip as a starter
- vegetable soups, particularly blended versions, are often popular with children and can include a wide variety of vegetables.
- add vegetables to sauces, such as pasta sauce, and add as pizza toppings
- offer a portion of fruit as a dessert choice. This could include cooked fruit such as fruit crumble
- chopped fruit is often more appealing to children than whole fruit
- fats such as butter or cream, salt or sugar should not be added to vegetables or fruit before serving
- always include fruit and/or vegetables as a choice where a packed lunch in a box is offered.

Starchy foods

Starchy foods are a key part of a healthy diet. They can be a good source of fibre and should make up around a third of the food we eat.

- offer a portion of starchy food such as potatoes, bread, rice or pasta, ideally with no added fat, with all meals. Try to ensure a variety of options are available on the menu
- provide a choice of brown/wholemeal or 50/50 varieties of bread or pasta to boost fibre intake.

Sugar

Most children in Northern Ireland have too much sugar in their diet which can contribute to tooth decay.

- avoid including drinks high in sugar, this is drinks with more than 5g sugar per 100ml, on children's menus or meal deals. Replace these with water and plain milk
- it's recommended that children limit fruit juice and smoothies to a maximum of 150ml a day as they are high in sugar. If providing these, try to serve no more than 150ml

- for dessert, offer options which are lower in sugar and fat, smaller portion sizes and/or replace existing menu items with fruit based options such as fresh fruit without added sugar or syrup
- avoid including desserts high in sugar, such as ice cream, in meal deals
- minimise the amount of confectionery, biscuits and cakes offered to children. Either replace these with healthier items such as fruit or reduce the portion size.

Fats and frying

Too much saturated fat can lead to the build-up of harmful fat in the body that you can't see. This can cause serious diseases in the future.

- minimise the amount of fried food on children's menus
- offer alternatives to chips such as boiled or mashed potatoes, rice or pasta
- include at least one meal that isn't fried on children's menus
- where possible grill or bake foods rather than frying and make this the default option
- if you are frying use healthier cooking oils such as sunflower or rapeseed oil.

Salt

Many children are eating too much salt.

- check the salt content of products and choose lower salt varieties where available for example, reduced salt and sugar beans and tomato ketchup.
- avoid serving foods high in salt, such as bacon, sausages and crisps.
- maximise use of alternative seasonings such as herbs and spices.
- avoid adding salt to meals during cooking and before serving for example, avoid adding salt to chips.
- remove salt and other condiments from tables and supply them only if requested.

Portion Size

Children often like adult meal choices but the portions are usually not appropriate for them.

- where practical, make child sized portions of main meals available, or offer smaller (or half) portions, especially of popular dishes, these might be popular with adults too
- consider the size of portions you are serving to children, particularly of fried foods items which are high in fat and calories. Where practical, allow parents to request smaller portions for younger children
- reduce portion sizes where you consistently have a lot of plate waste.

Promote healthier options

Ensure healthier choices are included in any meal deals or promotions and actively encourage the uptake of these.

- have the healthier choice as the default choice for example, mash rather than chips
- if only offering meal deals, consider also offering the option of purchasing the main meal on its own to account for children's varied appetites
- if offering a two-course meal deal, consider offering a savoury starter, such as soup or veggie sticks with a dip, as an alternative to a dessert
- where food and drinks are positioned where children can reach their choice, position healthier options such as water, plain milk and fruit at eye level and in the most prominent

positions

- if providing crisps and savoury snacks, offer smaller size packets of 30g or less. You could also try offering a selection of baked or popped versions – they're not fried so have a lower fat content than standard crisps.

Source healthier ingredients and food products from suppliers

- check the nutrition information about the foods and drinks you buy in and choose options with higher fibre and less salt, sugar and fats. Your supplier may be able to assist you.

Promote energy information

- the Food Standards Agency provides a free, online tool called [MenuCal](#) which helps businesses to calculate the energy value of food, in both kilojoules and kilocalories. The [MenuCal](#) tool also assists businesses to manage allergen information.