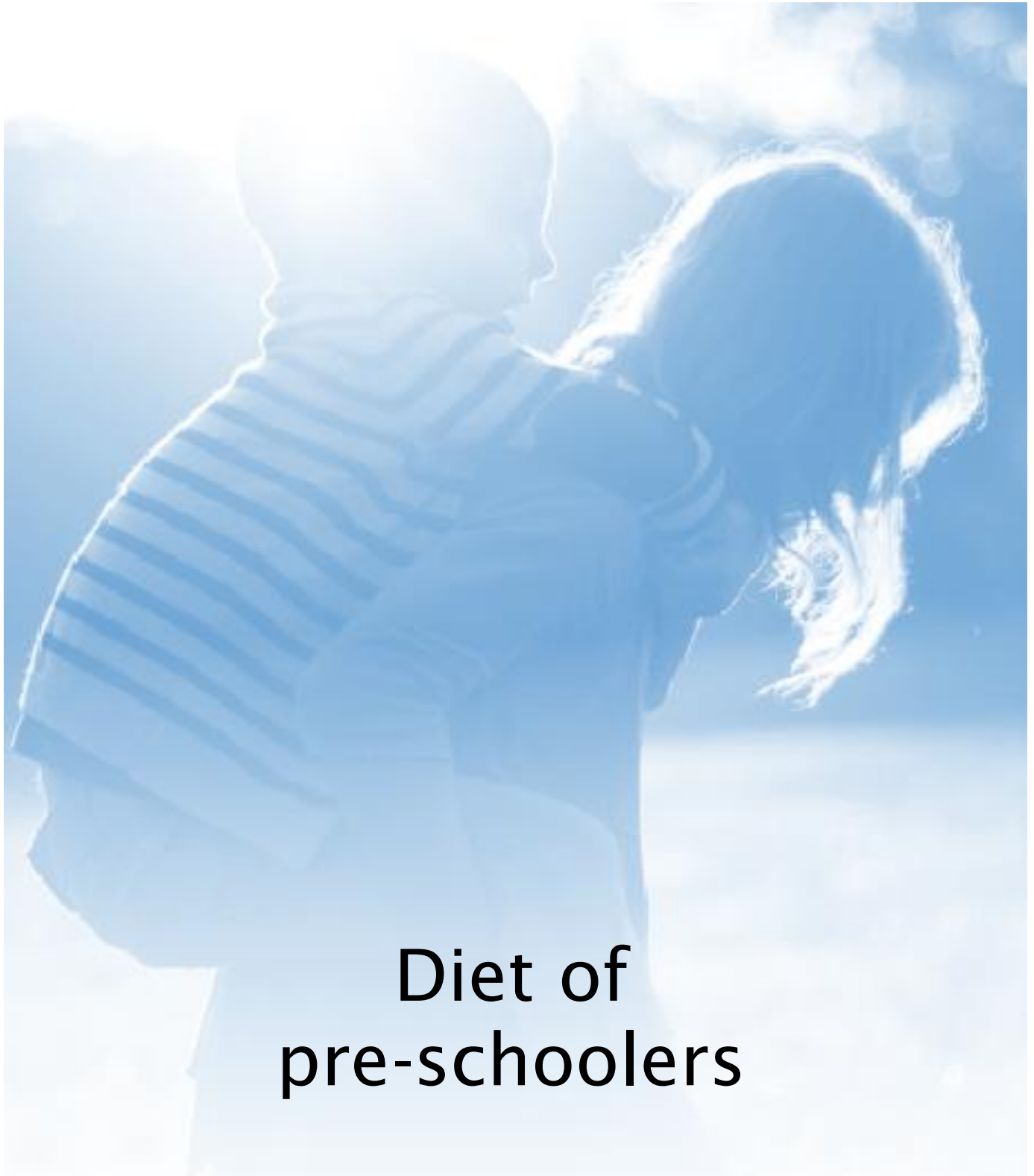




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# Diet of pre-schoolers

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## Content of this booklet

Tastes and eating habits develop at an early stage and are often retained long into adulthood. Consequently, it is important to make healthy choices regarding food in early childhood.

This booklet is designed for families with pre-schoolers. It should not, however, replace personal guidance given by a healthcare professional. Please contact a registered nutritionist (M.Sc.) if you have any questions about nutrition.

## Key points

- Adults are responsible for the meal times of the child and providing suitable food. The child knows how much they can eat.
- Two- to three-year-old children typically have reservations about new foods. It is often possible to enjoy a new food only after trying it multiple times.
- The plate model helps putting together a healthy meal for the child.
- Vitamin D preparations (7.5 µg) are recommended to all children over two years of age on a daily basis, all year round.



## Regular meals

Pre-schoolers need a lot of energy to grow and develop. Pre-schoolers need to eat four meals a day: a breakfast, lunch, dinner and an evening snack, and an additional 1–2 snacks when necessary. This keeps the sizes of meals suitable and prevents any unnecessary snacking.

The plate model helps in planning a balanced diet:

- Half of your meal should consist of fresh or cooked vegetables, fruit or berries.
- One quarter of your meal should consist of potatoes or whole-grain products, such as bread, porridge or pasta.
- One quarter of your meal should consist of fish, meat, egg, legumes or dairy products.

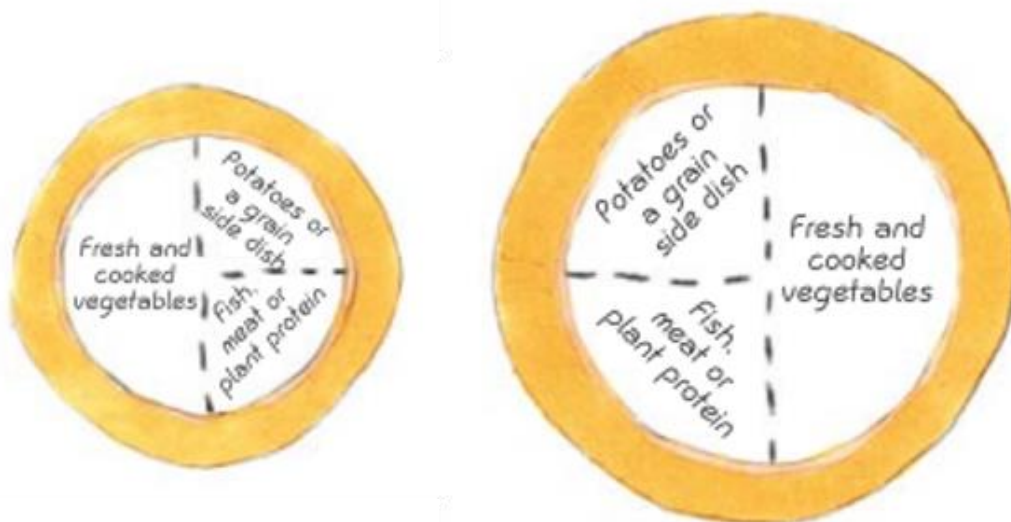


Image 1. Plate model for children and adults: same food, same proportions, but different meal sizes (THL 2019).



## Reservations about new foods

Two- to three-year-old children, in particular, have reservations about new foods. Irregular meal times, replacing meals with beverages or sweet snacks and forcing the child to eat interfere with the development of the child's ability to control their appetite and may result in eating problems.

The adults set an example when new foods are tasted at family meals. The child is more likely to accept new foods if they are offered with foods that are familiar to the child or if they see that others are eating the same food.

New foods can be studied together before tasting. You should encourage the child to try new foods, but forcing the child to eat them does not make tasting any food a pleasant experience. It is often possible to enjoy a new food only after trying it multiple times.

## Vegetables, fruit and berries

Pre-schoolers should eat at least five child's handfuls of vegetables, fruit and berries every day. Vegetables, fruit and berries should be available in all meals and snacks. The best way to get the child to eat vegetables is to offer them as finger food.

## Grain products

Whole-grain products are a good source of fibre. Fibre keeps you satiated and improves functioning of the bowel. The recommended daily intake of fibre for children aged 2–5 is 10–15 g. This goal can be easily accomplished by eating four meals with grain products with high fibre content (at least 6 g/100 g) and a portion of vegetables, fruit or berries at every meal.



**Breakfast**



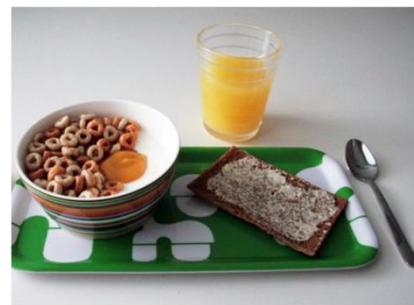
**Lunch**



**Snack**



**Dinner**



**Evening snack**

Image 2. Example of the meals of a pre-schooler (Tiainen 2016).

## Dairy products

Dairy products are the most important source of calcium, vitamin D and iodine for pre-schoolers. Eating 4 dl of liquid dairy products, such as milk, sour milk or yoghurt, and a slice of cheese every day ensures sufficient calcium and iodine intake.

If milk is not part of the child's diet, sufficient calcium and group B vitamin intake must be ensured by using plant-based drinks with additives, such as oat or soy drinks. If necessary, the diet must be supplemented with vitamin or mineral preparations.

The dairy products offered to children should also be fat-free or low-fat. Many dairy products marketed for children contain lots of added sugar. Therefore, careful attention must also be paid to the sugar content of dairy products.



## Sources of protein

In addition to dairy products and legumes, fish, chicken, meat and egg are good sources of protein. The recommendation is to eat different species of fish 2–3 times a week. Red meat and meat products should be eaten less frequently. Meat can be replaced with legumes and plant-based protein products at meals. The recommendation is to eat 2–3 eggs a week.

Children less than two years old are recommended to eat a maximum of one meal with sausages and 3–4 pieces of cold cuts a week. The corresponding maximum recommendations for children over two years old are one meal with sausages a week and one piece of cold cuts a day. Prefer meat products and cold cuts with low fat and salt content.

## Prefer soft fats

The child needs soft fats in order to grow and develop. You can increase your intake of soft fats by:

- using vegetable margarine on bread
- using vegetable oils or vegetable or bottled margarine for cooking
- adding an oily salad dressing to your salad
- eating fish at least twice a week
- adding nuts and seeds to your diet.

Pre-schoolers get enough soft fats when their diet includes 1.5–2 tbsp of vegetable oils or 4–6 tsp of margarine on a daily basis. By favouring fat-free or low-fat dairy products and low-fat meat, the quality of fat in the diet will remain good.



## Salt and sugar in moderation

The recommended maximum daily intake of salt for children aged 2–10 is 3–4 g. It is easy for children to eat too much salt by eating cereals, cold cuts, cheese and bread. Try to prefer alternatives with low salt content when it comes to these food products. Ensure that you use iodised salt in cooking.

Juices, sweets, sweetened dairy products and soft drinks contain lots of added sugar. The maximum recommended daily intake of sugar for two-year-old children is 30 g (2 tbsp). A maximum of one glass of juice per day is recommended, preferably with a meal. Water is the best drink for pre-schoolers.

## Vitamin and mineral preparations

Vitamin D preparations (7.5 µg) are recommended to all children over two years of age on a daily basis, all year round. A diverse and sufficient diet ensures the proper intake of other nutrients.



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Text content: Riikka Suorajärvi-Bron, registered nutritionist (M.Sc.)

Sources: Eating together - food recommendations for families with children. THL 2019.

Cover image: Pixabay

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