

The Impact of Junk Food on Children's Health



Highlights

Junk food is unhealthy food that is high in starch, sugar, saturated fat, trans fat, and salt.

Most junk foods lack the nutrients that growing children need.

An occasional junk food treat is okay but should be given in moderation.

Children who are overweight and not very active should avoid junk food as much as possible.

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What is Junk Food?

Junk food refers to unhealthy foods that include sweet drinks, lollies, chocolates, sweet snacks, chips and crisps, crunchy snack foods, biscuits, cakes, most fast foods, pies, sausage rolls, jam, and honey.

The food industry prefers terms like 'extras,' and dietary guidelines call junk foods 'discretionary choices.'

Why is Junk Food Not Good for Children?

Junk foods are high in starch, sugar, saturated fat, trans fat, and salt. They are low in fruit, vegetables, fibre, and wholegrains, which means they do not provide the essential vitamins, minerals, and dietary fibre that growing children need.

How Much Junk Food Should Kids Eat?

Children who are overweight and not very active should avoid junk food as much as possible. Children with a healthy weight should focus on eating more foods from the five food groups than junk food. Junk food should not replace healthy foods that are needed for growth.

While an occasional junk food treat is acceptable, children should not develop a junk food habit. Even if your child is slim and active now, their dietary needs will change as they stop growing, so moderation is key.

Suggested Serving Sizes for Junk Food

If your child occasionally consumes junk food, a serving of 500 to 600 kilojoules is appropriate. Here are some examples:

Biscuit (such as chocolate-coated or caramel filling): 1 (20g)

Biscuits, plain sweet: 2 to 3 (35g)

Cake: 1 small slice (40g)

Chocolate: 5 squares (25g)

Crackers: mini packet (25g)

Fruit drink: 250mL

Hot chips (takeaway): 12 (60g)

Ice cream: 2 small scoops or 1 scoop of premium brands \ (75g\)
Jam or honey: 2 tablespoons \ (60g\)
Muesli bar: 1 average \ (35g\)
Party pie: 1 \ (40g\)
Popcorn: 2 cups \ (25 to 30g\)
Potato crisps: half a snack packet \ (25g\)
Processed meats: 2 slices \ (50 to 60g\)
Sausages: 1 % regular or 2 thin \ (50 to 70g\)
Sugar lollies \ (e.g., jelly babies or snakes\): 20 to 25g

Note that these servings are likely smaller than most people typically offer.

Salt in Junk Food

While children need some salt in their diet for healthy nerves and muscles, too much salt can increase the risk of health problems. Excess salt can contribute to respiratory issues like asthma, as well as increase the risk of osteoporosis and high blood pressure later in life. Salt also increases thirst, which, if satisfied with sugary drinks, can contribute to excess weight.

Approximately 80% of the salt you consume comes from processed foods, and about 20% is added during cooking or at the table.

Fat in Junk Food

All children need some fat in their diets to stay healthy. Fat provides energy and essential nutrients for growth and physical activity. It's important to make healthy fat choices.

Saturated fats are found mainly in meat and dairy products. Small amounts in a healthy diet are acceptable.

Trans fats are formed when vegetable oils are used in processed foods. These fats are unhealthy and should be avoided.

Unsaturated fats are found in foods like avocados, almonds, cashews, peanuts, fish, eggs, and certain oils, and have proven health benefits.

If giving cow's milk or other types of milk to toddlers, they should have full-fat varieties until they reach 2 years of age. Afterward, they should

transition to low-fat dairy products.

Sugar in Junk Food

All sugars added to foods provide energy but no essential nutrients. Sugar encourages overeating, contributing to excess weight and other health issues. Sugar-sweetened drinks are particularly problematic because they do not fill you up and can increase your overall calorie intake.

Sugar is also a food source for bacteria that cause tooth decay.

Sucrose: Found in sugarcane and sugar beets; this is the main ingredient in white sugar, brown sugar, raw sugar, golden syrup, treacle, and molasses.

Glucose: Naturally found in honey and some fruits and vegetables.

Fructose: Occurs naturally in fruits and honey; can be made from corn starch.

Lactose: The natural sugar in milk, also found in yogurt.

Galactose: Found in milk; maltose is a sugar found in malt and malted milk.

How Much Sugar Should Children Eat?

For children ages 3 to 4 years, 2 to 8 teaspoons of sugar per day is recommended. The natural sugars found in milk and whole fruit (not juice) are not problematic. Added sugars should be restricted to 10% (preferably 5%) of your child's daily energy intake. This amounts to about 6 to 12 teaspoons of sugar per day for adults.

Tools and Assistance

Understanding Junk Food and Its Impact

Nutrition guidelines and serving sizes - To help manage your child's intake of junk food, refer to resources that provide standard serving sizes and detailed nutritional information.

Health assessment tools - Consult a pediatrician or dietitian for tools to track your child's growth and ensure they're receiving the right nutrition.

Food label guides - Make use of guides that help you understand food labels, highlighting crucial components like sugar, fat, and sodium content in junk food.

Healthy recipe suggestions - Explore resources offering recipes that can replace junk food with nutritious, homemade alternatives.

Dietary consultation - If you're concerned about your child's diet, seek the help of a certified dietitian who can tailor meal plans suited to your child's needs.