

**Irish Heart Foundation**  
**Nutrition and Children Fact sheet**

**What is healthy eating?**

- Healthy eating is essential for good health and what we eat can help protect us or increase our chances of developing conditions such as heart disease.
- As children grow and develop rapidly, they need to establish healthy eating habits in childhood, which will stay with them and influence their chance of a healthier life.

**Link to heart disease:**

- While the symptoms of heart attack and stroke become obvious in adulthood, the underlying process begins much earlier in childhood<sup>1</sup>.

**Irish Children's Diet:**

- Eating at home is the main source of calories and the main influence on dietary quality for children aged 5 – 12 years<sup>2</sup>.
- Significant numbers of children have inadequate intakes of calcium, iron, vitamins A, C, D, and folate. Therefore foods contributing to calorie overload are not providing adequate amounts of essential nutrients<sup>2</sup>
- Children on average eat only a half serving of vegetables per day<sup>2</sup>
- Daily intake of soft drinks averages about 2 glasses, mainly sugar-containing drinks<sup>2</sup>

**Food Marketing to Children:**

- Most of the food marketed to children is unhealthy i.e. food that is high in fat, especially saturated and trans fat, sugar and salt, and low in essential vitamins, minerals and other important nutrients<sup>3</sup>.
- A recent survey by the HSE Southern Area showed that 75% of parents considered that TV food ads to children usually promote 'unhealthy' food<sup>4</sup>

**Summary of recommendations from the Irish Heart Foundation's Statement on Childhood Nutrition<sup>5</sup>:**

1. Where possible, encourage breastfeeding.
2. Recognise the need for a relatively high fat diet in children under 2 years of age. Because milk is the primary nutrient source for children under two years, it should not be considered as a high fat food to be excluded.
3. From 2-5 years, introduce a gradual reduction in total fat intake towards the goal of no more than 35% of energy from fat.
4. In meeting fat and energy requirements in children from 2 years onwards, concentrate on foods that contain monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats and that are low in saturated fats.
5. In meeting calcium requirements, consider milk as a primary calcium source but consider using low-fat milk from between ages 2-5 years.
6. Do not add salt to food.
7. Choose from a wide variety of foodstuffs. To this end, use the Food Pyramid to communicate this message to the public.
8. Snack foods tend to be high in saturated and trans fats, sodium and sugar. They should be used as an occasional treat and not as part of the staple diet.
9. Encourage regular, family-centred meals.
10. Encourage the development of a public health campaign to improve childhood nutrition to prevent CVD, especially among at-risk groups such as disadvantaged sectors of society and families with a history of premature CVD.
11. Limit television viewing and thereby exposure to food advertising.
12. Encourage play and physical activity.
13. Further research is needed including:
  - i. On-going surveillance on nutrient intake among Irish children
  - ii. Research into the specific nutrient requirements of selected groups of children such as diabetic children.
  - iii. Studies of the long-term effects of the recommended changes made during childhood.
  - iv. Further studies of genetic influences on CVD and gene-nutrition interaction.

**References:**

- 1) Fisher AE, Van Horn L, McGill HC. Nutrition and Children. A statement for healthcare professionals from The Nutrition Committee, American Heart Association. *Circulation*, 1997 May 6; 95(9): 2332-2333.
- 2) Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance (2005) National Children's Food Survey. [www.iuna.net](http://www.iuna.net)
- 3) European Heart Network (2005) The Marketing of Unhealthy Food to Children in Europe. A report of Phase 1 of the 'Children, obesity and associated avoidable chronic diseases' project. Brussels.
- 4) Department of Public Health, Health Services Executive Southern Area (2005) 'Our Children...their future...why weight?' Cork.
- 5) Irish Heart Foundation and National Heart Alliance (2002) Preventing Cardiovascular Disease: Statement on Childhood Nutrition: A Resource for Health Professionals. Dublin.