

## EATING FOR BRAIN HEALTH

Want a smart kid? Nutrition is one of the most important things to consider, along with brain stimulation.

Food – good food – is the building material your child's brain needs to grow and run properly. It needs carbohydrates for energy, and proteins and healthy fats to build connective pathways between the brain cells. Vitamins, minerals and other essential nutrients help create the neurotransmitters that relay signals between these brain cells.

Your child's brain grows its fastest from about the 10<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy and again just before birth and for the first two years of life. It continues to grow during teenage years. Good nutrition is absolutely critical at all stages and the effects will last a lifetime.

Children who do not get adequate nutrition in their first few years of life are more likely to have problems throughout life. This includes lower IQ, slower language and motor development, and poorer school performance.

Consider these healthy eating tips for pregnant and breastfeeding women:

- If pregnant, speak with your Doctor about how much weight gain is appropriate for you. Gaining an appropriate amount of weight during pregnancy keeps you and your growing baby healthy.
- Eat lots of fruits and vegetables for the antioxidants that protect your baby's brain from tissue damage.
- Get your folic acid by eating lots of leafy greens and fortified grain products. Also, women of childbearing age should take a folic acid supplement of 400 mcg a day.
- Eat healthy fats from a variety of sources like fish, walnuts, flax, avocado and canola, soybean, or olive oil.
- If you are vegetarian, check with Dial-A-Dietitian (1-800-667-3438) to ensure that you are getting enough protein to build cells and hormones for your growing baby.
- Avoid alcohol in any amount while pregnant.
- The World Health Organization recommends breastfeeding up to two years of age or beyond. Mother's breast milk is the perfect food for the baby's developing brain.
- When you start feeding your baby solids, usually around six months of age, include iron rich foods such as finely minced meats and iron fortified cereals as this is important in developing a healthy brain.

As your child grows, continue to nourish their brain.

- Eat real, unprocessed foods as much as possible.
- Follow Canada's Food Guide ([www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide](http://www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide)).



# Interior Health

- Eat a rainbow of food. Blueberries, red cherries, yellow peppers, dark leafy greens, creamy cauliflower, brown mushrooms, and orange carrots! Each colour of food contributes nutrients necessary for good brain health.
- Balance your food choices. Eat a variety of foods from each of the food groups.
- Don't skip meals, and give kids a healthy snack between meals. This gives the continuous nutrients required for growth and development.
- Enjoy family mealtimes at least once a day, focusing on your child's behaviour rather than how much or what they eat. Feeling safe and connected helps kids do better in school.

Foods that make it harder for the brain to grow and do its job include:

- Processed foods with artificial sweeteners or coloring
- Sugary drinks and foods
- Trans fats and partially-hydrogenated oils
- Processed snack foods and luncheon meats.

One day your child will thank you for feeding them brain food. They will reap what you have sowed.

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