



Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care Services

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Introduction

The aim of these *Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care* is to inform, develop and implement Healthy Eating Policy and practice in Early Learning and Care Services. This is to ensure the promotion of healthy foods and drinks in main meals, snacks and celebrations, are agreed in partnership with children, parents, service providers and the wider community.

These Nutrition Standards deliver on a key action in 'First 5', the Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families which aims to ensure an optimum start for all children in Ireland.

Early Learning and Care Services have a key role in supporting children's development of lifelong healthy eating patterns, skills, behaviours and attitudes.

For children attending these Services on a full-time basis in particular, Early Learning and Care Services provide a significant proportion of their daily food intake – as much as 70%. Considering that 96% of children in this country avail of the universal Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) pre-school programme from the age of 2 years and 8 months, it becomes clear that the programme provides a significant opportunity to influence healthy eating habits from an early age.

The Early Years Services Regulations state that Early Learning and Care Services must ensure that all children in attendance receive a nutritious diet which takes account of individual needs and preferences. Under these Regulations, Early Learning and Care Services are required to develop a Policy on Healthy Eating. The Tusla Early Years Inspectorate inspects the Policy using these Regulations and requirements.

Síolta, the National Quality Framework, recognises the importance of actively promoting the development of healthy eating habits in children attending Early Learning and Care Services. Síolta encourages Services to consider children's enjoyment and appreciation of eating, and to promote mealtimes as social opportunities for children to learn about nutrition in a fun way.

Aistear, the National Curriculum Framework, introduces healthy eating under the theme of Well-Being, where the learning goal is to support very young children to master independent eating and drinking skills, and to become aware of different food types and their benefits in a relaxed and supportive environment. Young children's learning is greatly enhanced when they participate in the preparation of their food and when healthy choices are encouraged.



While the focus of the Standards is on the nutritional aspects of food, mealtimes do not happen in isolation but are an intrinsic part of the child's social day. Every healthy eating occasion, therefore provides opportunities for holistic learning. Mealtimes are, by their nature, social occasions and the accompanying language, communication and customs provide valuable learning. Associating the enjoyment of healthy food with social interaction on a daily basis may yield positive reciprocal benefits for both.

Within these Standards, Services are encouraged to inform children and raise awareness with parents and families about healthy eating including correct portion size for young children and limiting treats. Family background and culture in relation to foods offered must also be considered.

The *Healthy Ireland Smart Start (HISS) Programme* for Early Learning and Care Services builds on practitioners existing knowledge and skills to promote children's health and well-being.

These Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care Services will be a key resource for Services implementing the Regulations, for the National Practice Frameworks (*Síolta* and *Aistear*), and will inform the delivery of the HISS Programme, all of which will positively influence children's long-term health.

Development of Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1 to 4 year olds

The Department of Health, together with a team of nutrition experts, has created a collection of *National Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1 to 4 year olds*, including the Children's Food Pyramid. These resources are designed to help parents, healthcare professionals and education professionals to teach good eating habits to children. It lays out clearly what foods children should be eating, recommends portion sizes, and outlines how often children should be given treats. The leaflet produced as part of these resources should be shared with parents if possible. The key messages are shown on page 7.



Healthy eating habits last a lifetime

A variety of healthy foods should be offered to instill healthy eating habits from an early age.

Small servings for small tummies

Children aged 1 to 4 year olds. should be given 3 small meals and 2 to 3 healthy snacks a day. Smaller, younger children will eat less, while older, taller older children will eat more.

Milk is essential

Offer children 3 servings of milk, yogurt or cheese every day.

Limit treat foods

To avoid childhood obesity, only allow children tiny amounts of foods high in fat, sugar or salt just once a week.

Forget fizzy drinks

Fizzy drinks and some cordials can damage childrens' teeth. Offer them water or milk instead.

Stick to a routine

Stick to regular times for meals and snacks.

Children should be encouraged to serve themselves.

Every child is different and so is their appetite and allowing them to eat to satisfaction is an important part of their learning.

Children's Food Pyramid

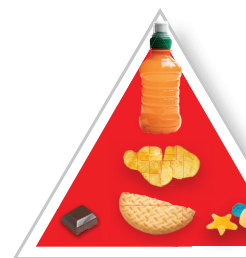
A guide for children aged 1–4

For more information visit www.gov.ie/healthyireland/eatwell

Foods and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt



Maximum once a week and in **TINY** amounts
These foods can be linked to childhood obesity.



Fats, spreads and oils

Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts

Milk, yogurt and cheese

Vegetables, salad and fruit

Cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice



Note: The Children's Food Pyramid above shows examples of foods on each food shelf. It does not show the recommended amounts for each food group.

Serving Guide One serving is

Fats, spreads and oils	• 1 teaspoon spread on bread and oven-bake or grill foods instead of frying
Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts	• 30g cooked beef, lamb or pork, chicken, turkey or fish • 1 medium egg • 35g cooked portion tofu • 35g hummus • ¼ cup (40g) baked beans, peas, lentils or chick peas • 1 heaped teaspoon (12g) smooth peanut or nut butter • 2 falafels
Milk, yogurt and cheese	• 200ml or 2x100ml milk • 200ml or 2x100ml unsweetened soya 'milk' fortified with calcium • 1 pot (125g) yogurt • 2 small pots (47g) plain fromage frais • 2 adult thumbs of cheese
Vegetables, salad and fruit	• 1 small fruit such as a plum, kiwi or mandarin • ½ medium sized fruit like an orange, an apple, a pear or a banana • 5–6 berries or grapes cut in quarters • 3–4 cooked vegetable sticks • 3–4 cucumber sticks • 100ml unsweetened orange juice • ½ cup cooked vegetables or tinned fruit • 100ml homemade or readymade vegetable soup • 3–4 cherry tomatoes cut in halves
Cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice	• ½ cup (30g) dry porridge • ½ cup (30g) flaked cereal • 1–1½ wheat biscuits • ½–1 slice bread • ½–1 small roll • ½ pitta pocket • ½ small wrap • ½ chapatti • 1–2 crackers • 1 plain rice cake • 1 unsalted breadstick • ½–1 small potato • 30–40g sweet potato or yam • ½ cup (30–40g) pasta, rice, noodles or couscous

Source: Department of Health/Health Service Executive 2020.

	 Ages one and two	 Ages three and four
	In very small amounts	In very small amounts
	2 Servings a day	3-4 Servings a day
	3 Servings a day	3 Servings a day
	2-3 Servings a day	4-5 Servings a day
	3-4 Servings a day	4-6 Servings a day

Does not represent the amount of food a 1 to 4 year old child should eat every day.

Try to use child-size plates and bowls

us 2 falafels	 20cm Child or Side Plate	 26cm Adult Plate
banana orange juice es cut in quarters	 11cm Child Bowl	 16cm Adult Bowl

Breastfeeding



Breastfeeding is recommended in Ireland until children are 2 years of age or beyond.

Vitamin D



Children aged 1 to 4 need to take 5 micrograms (5µg) of vitamin D only drops or liquid every day from Halloween to St Patrick's Day.

Drinks



Water, breastmilk and milk are the drinks recommended for your children.

Meal and snack requirements

The Early Years Inspectorate’s Quality and Regulatory Framework (2018) sets out food and drink requirements (Table 1 and Fig. 1).

Table 1: the meal and snack requirements by type of service

Type of service	Meal and snack requirements
Full day care service (more than 5 hours)	At least two meals and two snacks One meal must be a hot meal
Part time day care service (Up to 5 hours)	At least two meals and one snack It is not necessary to have a hot meal
Sessional pre-school service (Up to 3.5 hours)	One meal and one snack

Fig 1. Excerpt from the Early Years Inspectorate’s Quality and Regulatory Framework

Regulation 22: Food and Drink
Purpose
As the registered provider, you must ensure that all children attending the service receive a nutritious and varied diet, which takes their individual needs and preferences into consideration.
Requirements of Regulatory Compliance
63. Roles and responsibilities
Relevant staff have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to ensuring that adequate, suitable, nutritious and varied food and drink are available for each child. See Regulation 9.
64. Healthy eating
Policy on Healthy Eating

- There is evidence of the policy on healthy eating being implemented.

- Relevant staff know the requirements, and have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to the policy on healthy eating.
- Relevant staff have received training on the Policy on Healthy Eating.

See Regulation 10.

See Appendix 12.

65. Food and drink

- Adequate quantities of food and suitable portion sizes are available for children. The food is suitable for the age and stage of development of the child, and there is enough food supplied to cover the number of hours the child is in the care of the Service.
- Children in Full Day Care – that is, for more than 5 hours – have at least two meals and two snacks offered to them, one of which is a hot meal. If a child does not want the food offered for any reason, a healthy alternative is offered.
- Children in Day Care for up to a maximum of a 5-hour session are offered at least two meals and one snack. It is not necessary to have a hot meal.
- Children in Day Care for up to a 3.5-hour session have one meal and one snack.*
- Clean and safe drinking water is available and accessible to children at all times.
- Water used for infants under 1 year is boiled and cooled before use.
- Children are supported to self-serve as appropriate.
- Water and milk are the only drinks offered.
- The meals and snacks are of appropriate textures for infants.
- Breastfeeding supports are provided where required.

Examples: provide storage for breast milk, and facilities for mothers to breastfeed.

- Powdered infant formula is managed appropriately in the Service.
- Food safety provisions include:
 - » safe facilities to store food, including a fridge for perishable foodstuffs;
 - » a system where all food and drinks brought from the child's home are identifiable to the child.
- Special occasions like birthday parties are in line with the service's policy on healthy eating. See Regulation 27.

* In practice, this means that, if a child attends a sessional service and has not had a breakfast (morning session), or lunch (afternoon session), a breakfast or a lunch is provided, in addition to the regular snack. In accordance with the Health Service Executive – Feeding your Baby: Introducing Family Meals, available at: www.healthpromotion.ie/hp-files/docs/HPM00971.pdf. PIF is managed in accordance with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland's Guidance Note no. 22, available at: www.lenus.ie/hse/bitstream/10147/227213/1/GN+22+REV+2+FINAL.pdf.

How are the Standards presented?

The Nutrition Standards are food-based and are provided for each meal type as follows – breakfast, snack, cold meal, hot meal. The Standards for drinks are presented first, as drinks should be available throughout the day.

There are Standards that apply to all meals and these are listed in their own section.

The Standards are based on the new Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1 to 4 year olds and the recommended serving sizes. With regards to vegetables, salads and fruit, the Guidelines state that the number of servings that children should eat depends on their age.

2 servings for 1 year olds	3 servings for 2 year olds	4 servings for 3 year olds	5 servings for 4 year olds
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A serving is the amount that will fit into the palm of the child’s hand. For the purposes of these Standards, this measure isn’t practical for planning and serving. These Standards therefore, have set one serving as 40g, which is a suitable quantity to offer a 3 to 4 year old. The Standards will indicate a half serving for 1 to 2 year olds.

Children should be encouraged to serve themselves. It is absolutely fine if they choose not to eat all of the serving. Every child is different, and allowing them to eat to satisfaction is an important part of their learning. Children’s appetites vary from day to day but it’s important that adequate serving sizes are available to allow children to eat this amount if they wish to.

Young children need to eat small amounts and frequently. It is important that there aren’t very long gaps between meals and snacks. Leave a gap of no more than 2 to 2.5 hours.

How were the Standards developed?

These Standards were developed with the assistance of **safefood** and the Health Service Executive in cooperation with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Early Learning and Care Centres Pilot Programme, and are based on the Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1 to 4 year olds, Department of Health, 2020.

Who are the Standards for?

The Standards have been developed for providers who are participating in Early Learning and Care Services. They are also relevant to any provider in the Early Years sector who provides food and drink to children aged 1 to 4 years old.

For Services that provide food and drink to children over 5 please refer to Appendix 1 on page 50.



Standards

0 to 1 year olds

These Standards are to support practitioners in looking after infants attending Early Learning and Care Services. They have been developed by the HSE for the Smart Start programme:

- to meet their nutritional needs and promote optimal growth,
- to develop lifelong healthy eating patterns, skills and behaviours, and
- to help implement healthy eating policy in Early Years Services.



Why is nutrition important in the early years setting?

Nutrition is essential for growth, development and activity, as well as tooth development and prevention of decay.

Nutrition is a basic component of providing a quality service in Early Learning and Care and education settings. Menus can be planned to provide a wide variety of healthy foods, snacks and drinks.

The Early Learning and Care setting is a “natural supportive environment”. All Early Years’ Service practitioners can play an important health-promoting role.

A playful and fun learning environment can teach children the principles of healthy eating.

Eating habits and patterns are developed in the first few years of life.

Breastfeeding

- An ideal blend of nutrients providing everything a baby needs for growth and development in the first 6 months of life.
- The regulations stipulate that a space is provided for breastfeeding mothers if it is required.
- Breast milk can be stored:
 - » sealed outside of the fridge for up to 4 hours in temperatures less than 20 degrees, or
 - » in a fridge for up to 5 days (place it at the back of the shelf above the vegetable compartment and not inside the door).

Expressed breast milk

Healthy full-term babies can drink breast milk at room temperature or warmed to body temperature.

To warm breast milk, place the breast milk bottle or bag into a cup, jug or bowl of lukewarm water for a few minutes to bring it to body temperature (37°C or 99°F). Alternatively, use a bottle warmer.

- Do not allow the temperature to go above 40°C (104°F).
- Do not use a microwave, as this can overheat breast milk.
- Gently swirl the bottle or bag, without shaking or stirring, to mix any separated fat.

Nutrition Standards – 0 to 1 year olds

Formula feeding

- **First infant formula (Number 1)** is the type of formula recommended from birth until a baby is 12 months old.
- **Follow-on formula (Number 2)** Switching to follow on formula has no benefits for a baby. Instead, from 6 months, babies need to start family foods/solids and aim for a healthy, balanced diet.
- **Hungry baby milk** contains more casein than whey. Casein is a protein that is harder for babies to digest. It's often described as suitable for 'hungrier babies'. There is no evidence that 'hungry baby milk' helps babies settle better.

Formula feeding – how much formula to give a baby?

Baby's age	Number of milk feeds	Daily fluid intake
Birth to 3 months	6 to 8 feeds - feeding every 3 to 4 hours	150ml per kg - 2½ fluid ozs per lb
4 to 6 months	4 to 6 feeds - feeding every 4 to 6 hours	150ml per kg - 2½ fluid ozs per lb
7 to 9 months	4 feeds - baby also having food	120ml per kg - 1.7 fluid ozs per lb Max 600ml/ 21 ozs from feeds
10 to 12 months	2-3 feeds - baby also having food	110ml per kg - 1.7 fluid ozs per lb Max 400ml/ 14 ozs from feeds

Up to 12 months old, give cooled boiled water, even if it's bottled water.

Food safety

- FSAI (Food Safety Authority of Ireland) do not recommend preparation of infant formula on the premises.
- Parents should prepare and provide all milk feeds for the day/session for their baby, as this is safer and more practical.
- For journeys of less than 2 hours, parents are advised to remove prepared bottles from their fridge (just before leaving home) and place them in an insulated cool bag with ice packs.
- All Services should provide:
 - » safe facilities to store food, including a fridge for perishable foodstuffs, and
 - » a system by which all food and drinks brought from the child's home are identifiable to the child.

Feeding & emotional wellbeing

Feeding is a great opportunity to contribute to a baby's emotional wellbeing. To make the most of it:

- stay in close contact, chat/sing to the baby while feeding;
- look into the baby's eyes and they will often look back at you – this helps them feel safe and loved;
- take it slowly and resist the urge to multi-task;
- always use your arm and hand to bottle feed - never prop the bottle, for example, on a cushion, as it increases the risk of the baby choking.

Do:

✓ **Breast or formula milk for the first six months meets the baby's needs for food & drink**

✓ Introduce a cup or free-flow beaker for drinks of **cooled boiled water from about 6 months.**

✓ Aim to replace all bottles with a **cup or beaker only by the time the baby is 1 year old.**

Cow's milk (full-fat) is suitable as a drink from 12 months onwards.

Low-fat cow's milk may be suitable from 2 years onwards if the child has a healthy balanced diet.

Don't give baby:

✗ **juice** – this includes diluted pure unsweetened fruit juices

✗ **fizzy drinks** – harmful to teeth and can reduce appetite for food.

✗ **tea / coffee** – it reduces their iron uptake and can affect sleep.

Don't add any of the following to a baby's bottle:

✗ **sugar, rusks or baby rice.**

✗ **any medicines, unless advised by your GP or paediatrician.**

Nutrition Standards – 6 to 12 months



Introducing family foods

6 to 12 months

Role of Early Learning and Care practitioners in supporting parents to introduce solids.

Working with parents to:

- Identify when a baby is ready to start introducing solid foods.
- Move through the stages of introducing solids.
- Record progress and feedback to parents.
- Encourage finger foods.
- Encourage healthy meals, snacks and drinks, as per the Healthy Eating Policy.

Babies should be introduced to solids between 17 to 24 weeks.

Signs your baby is ready for solids

Let the parents / guardians know if a baby is showing more than one sign of readiness for solids, such as:

- able to sit up with support and can control head movements. or
- not fully satisfied after a milk feed / demanding feed more frequently for over a week.
- showing an interest in food or others eating, reaches out for food.
- chewing and dribbling more frequently (this could also be a sign of teething).
- loss of tongue thrust.
- co-ordination of hand and eye movements.

Introducing family foods - stage 1

- Start with
 - » puréed vegetables and fruit and cereals, e.g., baby rice
 - » puréed well-cooked meat, poultry, boneless white / oily fish, beans, peas and lentils
- Be led by the baby.
 - » some babies might take more than 1 teaspoon at their first spoon feed and others might take longer to learn this new skill.

Liquids used to prepare solid food.

You can use:

- ✓ breast milk or formula milk
- ✓ water or stock from cooked vegetables
- ✓ cooled boiled water
- ✓ pasteurised full fat cow's milk (small amounts).

Because they contain a lot of salt, DO NOT USE:

- ✗ gravy
- ✗ stock cubes
- ✗ jars or packets of sauce

Nutrition Standards – 6 to 12 months

Introducing family foods - stage 2

Continue with the same food as in stage 1, plus:

- well-cooked eggs.
- bread, rice and pasta.
- cheese (pasteurised) & yogurt.
- porridge and wholegrain breakfast cereals (low sugar & salt).
- pasteurised cow's milk can be used in small amounts to moisten foods.

Aim for:

- 3 meals a day, each about 2 to 4 tablespoons of food.
- 2 to 3 snacks in between main meals.
- Foods should be offered before milk feed.
- Some drinks taken from a cup or beaker.
- Finger foods.

Be led by the baby, and feed to their appetite.

Finger foods are an important step in learning to chew. They should be offered from 7 months old.

Finger foods that can be easily handled and enjoyed include:

Cooked vegetables such as carrot, parsnip, sweet potato, broccoli	Slices of omelette
Peeled fruit such as pear, banana, peaches, melon, avocado	Homemade pancakes
Fingers of buttered toast, French toast or bread sticks	Potato bread or soda bread
Cooked pasta shapes	Plain rice or corn cakes
Sliced or shredded meats	Cheese cut into strips

Corn snack and vegetable puff-type finger foods melt in a baby's mouth so they do not have to chew, meaning the baby doesn't learn feeding skills.

Introducing family foods - stage 3.

Good options include:

- Home-made soup.
- Small wholemeal scone with butter.
- Beans or boiled egg with wholemeal toast.
- Soft cooked vegetables sticks or chopped fruit.
- A rice cake or yogurt.

Aim for:

- 3 meals of about 4 to 6 tablespoons.
- 2 to 3 snacks / finger foods
- A variety of wholegrain and white bread, pasta and rice
- the child to manage more than 2 textures in one meal.
- All drinks (other than breastfeeds) to be taken from a cup or beaker by 12 months.

Be led by the baby, and feed to their appetite.

Foods to avoid up to 12 months.

✗ Raw shellfish (risk of food poisoning).	✗ Salt, gravies, packets or jars of sauces, packets of soup or meal makers or stock-cubes.
✗ Swordfish, shark, marlin or tuna (high in mercury).	✗ Tea or coffee.
✗ Unpasteurised cheese, milk or yogurt.	✗ Liver.
✗ Undercooked eggs.	✗ Processed or cured meats such as sausages, ham or bacon.
✗ Sugar / honey.	

Nutrition Standards – 6 to 12 months

Good feeding practices

- Babies should be sitting comfortably in a highchair that supports his/her feet.
- Babies should be allowed to explore food using all their sensory skills. This means seeing, touching and smelling what they are eating.
- Talk to the baby about the food and make eye contact.
- Never force-feed a baby.

Baby-led weaning:

- This involves encouraging babies to self-feed with solids rather than accept spoon-feeding with purées.
- There is no public health policy in Ireland on baby-led weaning.

Milk & nut milks

A child **over 12 months** should not have more than 600mls of full fat cow’s milk per day. This includes the milk used on breakfast cereals.

Do not give a child under 2 years:	
 low-fat milk / skimmed milk	 fruit juice drinks / fizzy drinks / dilutable squashes
 tea or coffee	 dairy alternatives (almond, coconut or oat milk).

Note 1: Plant milks may be recommended for babies with a Cow’s Milk Protein Allergy for practical use, e.g., mixing with breakfast cereal. However, plant milks do not provide adequate nutrition for growth and development.

Gluten & fish

Gluten

- Parents can introduce gluten between stage 1 and stage 3.
- Examples are bread, pasta, crackers and breakfast cereals.

Fish

- Parents can introduce fish at stage 1.
- From 7 months, parents should include 2 portions (1oz each) of oily fish per week, which is essential for brain/eye development.

Note: Introduce one food at a time. This is because if the baby has a reaction to a food, you will know what food caused the reaction.

Nuts, dairy, eggs.

From 12 months, pasteurised cow's milk can be given as a drink.

Food allergies

A child can be prevented from becoming allergic to certain foods like eggs, milk and peanuts if these foods are introduced into the child's diet early.

From 6 months parents can introduce

- Nuts as smooth peanut butter (or another nut butter) that is sugar-free and salt-free.
- Dairy as pasteurised dairy products, e.g., Cheddar cheese, natural yogurt.
- Eggs as well-cooked eggs at the right texture and consistency.

Nutrition Standards – 1 to 4 year olds

1 to 4 year olds

Small children have small tummies. They can only eat small amounts. They should be offered 3 meals and 2 to 3 healthy snacks every day. All their food and drink needs to be nourishing.

The amount of food a young child eats changes every day and at every meal depending on their needs. Taller, older children, and children who are more active, will eat more. These Standards include guidance on how much food to offer to:

- Children under the age of 1
- Children aged between 1 and 2
- Children aged from 3 up to their 5th birthday.

These Standards have been developed by nutrition experts in Ireland and are based on the Irish Healthy Eating Guidelines.





Drinks

Water and milk are the only drinks to be offered to children aged 1 to 5 years.

All drinks should be served from a beaker, cup or glass. Between 1 and 2 years, children can move on from using a beaker with a lid. Plastic cups are best for younger children.

Children should have easy access to clean and safe drinking water at all times. They require 6 to 8 drinks every day at home and elsewhere. Offer each child a drink at mealtimes and snack times and allow them free access to water at all times.

Fruit juice and any sweet-flavoured drinks, whether sweetened with sugar, fruit juice or artificial sweeteners, should not be available to children. These include fruit juices, juice drinks, squash / cordials or minerals / fizzy drinks.

Standard

- The only drinks available should be plain water (boiled and cooled water for children under 1 year old) or milk.
- Water must be freely accessible by children at all times.
- Full-fat milk is the only milk suitable for 1 and 2 year olds.
- Full-fat and low-fat milk is suitable for 3 and 4 year olds.
- Skimmed or fat-free milk should not be provided to 1 to 4 year olds.
- You can offer non-dairy soya 'milks' if the child is allergic to cow's milk. These should be unsweetened and fortified with calcium. Almond, coconut and rice plant-based alternatives to milk are not suitable for young children.

Nutrition Standard for breakfast



Nutrition Standard for breakfast

Breakfast gives children the energy they need for a healthy start. 1 to 4 year olds have small tummies and need to eat small amounts regularly throughout the day. This starts with breakfast in the morning.

A minimum of THREE items is provided at breakfast.

Using the Children's Food Pyramid as a guide, every breakfast contains 3 of any of the following items:

- ✓ 1 serving of cereal or bread
- ✓ 1 serving of milk, yogurt or cheese
- ✓ A serving of fruit (40g) or half-serving (20g), depending on age of child.

Occasionally an egg with toast and a choice of fruit may be offered to the child.

Breakfast cereal and breads

Standard

- Every breakfast includes one serving from this group.
- Breakfast cereals and porridge should be:
 - » fortified with iron (at least 12mg iron per 100g)
 - » low in sugar (5g or less per 100g) and salt (0.3g or less per 100g)

Notes

These starchy foods are inexpensive and provide energy, fibre, vitamins and minerals.

Each child should get a 50:50 mixture of wholemeal/wholegrain varieties of cereals, breads, pasta and rice throughout the day to ensure they get the right amount of fibre from foods.

One serving is:	
 30g dry porridge	 1 -1½ wheat biscuits
 30g flaked cereal	 ½ -1 slice of bread



Nutrition Standard for breakfast

Milk, yogurt and cheese

Standard

- Every breakfast should contain ONE serving from this group.
- Milk must be available to serve with cereal and combined with porridge oats.
- Provide full-fat milk to children aged 2 years and under.
- Provide full-fat or low-fat milk to children aged 3 and 4 years.

Notes

- Milk, yogurt and cheese are a good source of several nutrients, including protein, vitamins and most importantly calcium, which is important for healthy bone development.
- Milk is a good drink option as it's tooth friendly as well as nutritious.

One serving is:	
	200 ml milk – this can be on cereal and as a drink.
	1 pot (125g) yogurt.
	2 small pots (47g) of plain or natural fromage frais.
	2 adult-size thumbs (25g) of hard (Cheddar type) or semi-hard (Edam or Blarney) cheese.

Fruit

Standard

For breakfast, 1 to 2 year-olds should be offered a half-serving (20g) while three to four years olds should be offered one serving (40g). Offer a variety of fresh or tinned fruit in its own juice.

Notes

- Fruit provides vitamins, minerals and fibre.
- The vitamin C in fruit will help children’s bodies absorb iron from breakfast cereals.
- It is recommended that children eat the following servings of fruit and vegetables per day based on their age:

2 servings for 1 year olds	3 servings for 2 year olds	4 servings for 3 year olds	5 servings for 4 year olds
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- Cutting up fruit into smaller pieces can make it easier to eat for younger children. Berries, grapes and tomatoes should be halved or quartered.
- Whole fruits such as apples, bananas and oranges are a better choice than fruit juice as they are higher in fibre.

One serving is 40g, which is the following:	
 1 plum	 1 kiwi
 ½ an orange	 1 mandarin
 ½ an apple	 ½ of a pear
 5 or 6 berries or grapes cut in halves or quarters.	 ½ of a banana

Nutrition Standard for snacks

Healthy snacks are a very important part of the diet of young children and may be offered 2 to 3 times each day.

Some days children may be hungrier than others, and need filling, healthy snacks between meals.

Using the Children’s Food Pyramid as a guide each snack contains:
A half to one serving of breads or crackers, depending on the age of the child
One serving of milk, yogurt or cheese (only choose this once a day where two snacks are being offered)
A half to one serving of vegetables, salad or fruit depending on child’s age
A half to one serving of hummus or peanut butter if available, depending on child’s age.

A drink must be offered – either water or milk.

Younger children will require smaller amounts of foods.

If two snacks are being offered in the day, choose one sweet (e.g., yogurt and fruit) and one savoury (e.g., vegetable sticks and hummus).

Milk, cheese or yogurt

Standard

- Provide full-fat milk to children aged 2 years or under and low-fat milk to older children
- Milk, yogurt or cheese can only be given as one of the snacks. Offer other alternative snacks.

Notes

- Milk, yogurt and cheese are a good source of several nutrients, including protein, vitamins and most importantly calcium, which is important for healthy bone development.
- Milk is a good drink option as its tooth friendly.
- Offer non-dairy soya 'milks' if a child is allergic to cow's milk. These should be unsweetened and fortified with calcium. Almond, coconut and rice plant based alternatives to milk are not suitable for young children.
- Butter, cream and ice cream are not included in this group; butter and cream are classed as high fat foods, and ice cream is classed as a confectionery item.

One serving is



1 glass (200ml) milk or 2 x 100mls milk.



1 pot (125 g) yogurt.



2 small pots (47g) plain or natural fromage frais.



2 adult-size thumbs (25g) of hard (Cheddar type) or semi-hard (Edam) cheese.

Nutrition Standard for snacks

Vegetables, salad and fruit

Standard

- When vegetables, salad or fruit are offered as a snack, providers need to ensure that the snack contains a half-serving (20g) to one serving (40g) of fruit.
- Offer a variety of fresh or tinned fruit.
- Chop fruit and vegetables into age-appropriate sizes.
- Do not offer dried fruit as a snack.

Notes

- Fruit provides vitamins, minerals and fibre.
- When tinned fruit is offered, use fruit tinned in its own juice and not in syrup.
- It is recommended that children eat the following servings of fruit and vegetables per day based on their age:

2 servings for 1 year olds	3 servings for 2 year olds	4 servings for 3 year olds	5 servings for 4 year olds
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One serving is:	
40g of vegetables, salad or fruit which is equivalent to:	
	1 small fruit such as a plum, kiwi or mandarin
	3 or 4 cherry tomatoes halved or quartered.
	½ of a medium sized fruit like an orange, an apple, a pear or a banana
	3 or 4 vegetable sticks
	5 or 6 berries or grapes halved or quartered.

Cereals and breads

Standard

When offered as part of a snack, each child must be offered a half to one serving, depending on their age. A half serving must be offered to 1 and 2 years olds and one serving to 3 to 4 year olds,

Notes

- These starchy foods are inexpensive and provide energy, fibre, vitamins and minerals.
- Each child should get a 50:50 mixture of wholemeal/wholegrain varieties of cereals, breads, pasta and rice (carbohydrates) throughout the day to ensure they get the right amount of fibre from foods.

One serving is:	
 ½ -1 slice of bread	 1 plain rice cake
 ½-1 small roll or ½ pitta	 1 unsalted breadstick
 1 to 2 crackers	 ½ small wrap



Nutrition Standard for snacks

Meat, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, cheese, nut butters and hummus

Standard

When offered as part of a snack provide a half a serving to 1 and 2 year olds and one serving for 3 and 4 year olds.

Notes

- If available, choose 100% nut butters and smooth varieties, without added sugar and salt.
- Choose options that are low in salt (0.3g salt or less per 100g)

One serving is:



35g hummus



1 heaped teaspoon smooth peanut butter



2 adult size thumbs (25 g) of hard (Cheddar type) or semi-hard (Edam) cheese.





Nutrition Standard for a cold or light meal

Using the Children's Food Pyramid as a guide every cold or light meal contains:

A half to one serving of vegetables, salad and fruit, depending on the child's age

1 serving of pasta, rice or bread

1 serving of meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans OR cheese

Note: vegetable soup may be offered as an alternative to the vegetable serving

Nutrition Standards for a cold or light meal

Vegetables, salad and fruit

Standard

- Every cold or light meal contains a half or ONE serving of vegetables, salad or fruit, depending on the age of the child.
- Offer a variety of fresh, frozen, tinned and vegetables and fruits.
- Do not offer dried fruit as they are not kind to teeth.

Notes

- Offer a variety of different coloured fruit and vegetables to children every day.
- Fruit and vegetables provide vitamins, minerals and fibre.
- Serve vegetables and fruits in sizes and consistencies that are age-appropriate.
- It is recommended that children eat the following servings of fruit and vegetables per day based on their age:

2 servings for 1 year olds	3 servings for 2 year olds	4 servings for 3 year olds	5 servings for 4 year olds
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One serving is:	
	1 small fruit such as a plum, kiwi or mandarin
	3 or 4 vegetable sticks
	½ of a medium sized fruit like an orange, an apple, a pear or a banana
	½ cup of cooked vegetables or tinned fruit
	5 or 6 berries or grapes (cut in halves or quarters)
	100ml of homemade vegetable soup.
	3 or 4 cherry tomatoes (cut into halves or quarters)

Bread

Standard

Every cold or light meal contains ONE serving from this group.

Notes

- These starchy foods are inexpensive and provide energy, fibre, vitamins and minerals.
- Use a combination of white and wholegrain/brown varieties of pasta throughout the day to ensure that children get enough of fibre in their diets.

One serving is:	
 ½ to 1 slice of bread	 ½ chapatti
 ½ to 1 small bread roll	 ⅔ cup of pasta or rice.
 ½ to 1 pitta or small wrap	



Nutrition Standards for a cold or light meal

Meat, poultry, fish, beans, eggs or cheese

Standard

- Every cold or light meal contains ONE serving from this group.
- Processed meat or chicken products, fried foods, foods cooked in batter or breadcrumbs, or foods containing pastry, cannot be provided (e.g., bacon, ham, sausages, chicken nuggets and similar products).

Notes

- Chicken, turkey and fish are good low-fat options.
- Eggs and beans are easy to include in different meals and are a good source of protein.

One serving is:	
	30g of cooked red meat (pork, beef or lamb) or poultry
	30g cooked fish
	1 medium egg
	¼ cup baked beans, lentils, peas or chickpeas
	35g hummus
	35g cooked tofu
	2 falafels





Nutrition Standard for hot meal

For children that spend a full day in the Early Learning and Care Service, there is a requirement to provide a hot meal. This meal aims to provide regular, nutritious food to children. Every hot meal should contain:

Using the Children's Food Pyramid as a guide every hot meal contains:

½ to 1 serving of vegetables or salad

1 serving of potatoes, pasta, rice or bread

1 serving of meat, poultry, fish, egg, beans OR cheese

Nutrition Standard for hot meal

Vegetables, salad and fruit

Standard

- Every hot meal should include ½ to 1 serving of vegetables
- Offer a variety of fresh, frozen, tinned and dried vegetables and fruits
- Do not offer dried fruit as they are not kind to teeth
- Pies, casseroles, stews and other composite main course dishes must contain a minimum of 20g serving of vegetables per portion
- If dessert is offered this should be or contain a half (20g) to one serving (40g) of fruit

Notes

- Fruit and vegetables provide vitamins, minerals and fibre
- Offer a variety of different coloured fruit and vegetables to children every day
- Steam or boil vegetables in a small amount of water
- Spaghetti tinned in tomato sauce or baked beans do not count as a vegetable
- Do not add salt to vegetables when cooking
- Avoid serving vegetables in high fat sauces
- serve vegetable and fruit in sizes and consistency that are age appropriate
- It is recommended that children eat the following servings of fruit and vegetables per day based on their age:

2 servings for
1 year olds

3 servings for
2 year olds

4 servings for
3 year olds

5 servings for
4 year olds

Nutrition Standard for hot meal

One serving is:

	1 small fruit such as a plum, kiwi or mandarin		3 or 4 cherry tomatoes (cut into halves or quarters)
	½ of a medium sized fruit like an orange, an apple, a pear or a banana		3 or 4 vegetable sticks
	5 or 6 berries or grapes halved or quartered		½ cup of cooked vegetables or tinned fruit
	2 dessertspoons of tinned fruit, in own juice		100ml of homemade vegetable soup



Nutrition Standard for hot meal

Bread, potatoes, pasta and rice

Standard

- Every hot meal should contain ONE serving from this group.
- Pasta and rice should be offered at least once a week each.
- Don't add salt to water when cooking pasta, rice, or other starchy foods.
- Boil or steam potatoes.

Notes

- These starchy foods are inexpensive and provide energy, fibre, vitamins and minerals.
- Use a combination of white and wholegrain/brown varieties of pasta throughout the day to ensure that children get enough of fibre in their diets.

One serving is:	
 1/2 cup of cooked pasta	 1/2 to 1 small, cooked potato.
 1/2 cup of cooked noodles	 1/2 cup of cooked rice
 1/2 cup of cooked couscous	 1/2 cup of cooked sweet potato or yam

Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and cheese

Standard

- Every dinner includes ONE serving from this group.
- Processed meat or chicken products, fried foods, foods cooked in batter or breadcrumbs, or foods containing pastry, cannot be provided (for example bacon, ham, sausages, chicken nuggets and similar products).
- Fish should be available at least once a week.
- Meals containing red meat must be offered at least 2 to 3 times a week.
- Cheese can be used as the main protein source up to twice a week.

Notes

- Lean red meat is a good source of iron.
- Chicken, turkey and fish are good low-fat options.
- Beans, lentils and eggs are good sources of protein and are low in fat.
- Lean cuts of meat are best. Remove all visible fat before cooking and cook without added fats or oils.
- Oily fish, including mackerel, herring, salmon, trout and sardines, have omega-3 fats and vitamin D. Offer once a week.

One serving is:	
	30g of cooked red meat (pork, beef or lamb) or poultry
	30g cooked fish
	1 medium egg
	35g cooked tofu
	¼ cup baked beans, lentils peas or chickpeas
	2 adult size thumbs (25g) of hard (Cheddar type) or semi-hard (Edam) cheese

Standards that apply to all meals



Standards that apply to all meals

Wholegrain and wholemeal grains and breads

Plan daily menus so that children are getting a 50:50 mix of wholemeal / wholegrain varieties of cereals, breads, pasta and rice throughout the day. This will ensure they get the right amount of fibre from foods.

Oils and spreads

Only use very small amounts of fats, oils and spreads, for example, $\frac{3}{4}$ (5g) pat of butter on bread. Oven-bake or grill foods instead of frying them.

High fat, sugar and salt foods and drinks

The Red Triangle contains food and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt, which are NOT needed for a healthy diet. Consuming too much food or drink high in fat, sugar or salt is linked to childhood obesity.

Sweets, chocolate, biscuits, cakes, fizzy drinks or crisps should not be part of a child's daily diet. They should not be available on menus or used as rewards.

- Promote the Standards to parents and staff.
- Include children, laying table, serving themselves and tidying up

Menu plans

The Health Service Executive has produced a '3-Week Menu Plan' as a resource for Early Learning and Care Services. The menu plan can be found at the link below, and can be used to review your own menu plans.

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/our-priority-programmes/heal/healthy-eating-guidelines/3-week-menu-plan.pdf>

Other considerations

Catering for children with special dietary needs

Early Learning and Care providers will care for children with a variety of different needs. The most important thing to do is to discuss the child's needs with the parent(s) and identify the child's requirements and options. The most common dietary requirements are listed below.

Vegetarians

Food provided for those who are vegetarian should be varied.

Discuss with the child's parent(s) what foods the child eats. Some vegetarians only avoid red meat, while others may exclude all animal products.

Vegetarian sources of protein should be provided at cold / light and hot meals, e.g., chickpea casserole with pasta, lentil stew with rice, hummus filling in a bread roll.

Cheese must not be served as the only vegetarian option more than twice a week. Other options such as eggs, beans can be used as ingredients in soups or salads.

Children from ethnic communities following a traditional diet

Early Learning and Care providers must accommodate the traditions and customs of ethnic communities. Taking guidance from parents will help providers meet specific nutrition requirements. Some common food customs are listed on the following pages.

Guidance on foods for religious faiths

Children and their families may exclude certain foods or only eat foods prepared or cooked in a particular way according to their religious faith.

The table below is a general guide to food choices for specific religious groups. Fasting is common in many religions, although younger children tend to be exempt. Compliance with these restrictions may vary between denominations, branches or even families. Please do not take this as an authoritative list.

	Buddhist	Hindu	Jew	
Main dietary custom	Many are vegetarian Some may be vegan	Many are vegetarian	Eat only kosher* beef, lamb, poultry and fish (with fins and scales) *Kosher refers to permitted foods that have been selected and prepared according to particular rules of the Jewish religion	
Foods to check	Meat, poultry and fish Milk and dairy Eggs	Meat, poultry and fish Eggs	Eggs (can be eaten as long as there are no blood spots)	
Foods to avoid		Beef and beef products	Pork and pork products Shellfish or seafood without fins and scales	
Miscellaneous	Diet will vary depending on country of origin Garlic, onions and scallions may be forbidden	Strict Hindus also exclude animal sources of fat, onions, garlic, mushrooms, tea and coffee	May also exclude gelatine, fats, emulsifiers, stabilisers and additives from animal origin that is not kosher Meat and dairy are never eaten at the same meal Dairy foods may not be eaten until three hours after meat or poultry Meat and dairy must be prepared in separate kitchens using separate utensils	

Further information is available from:

www.halaal.org

www.kosher.org.uk

www.theismaili.org/nutrition

Muslim	Sikh	Rastafarian	Seventh Day Adventist
Eat only halal** beef, lamb, poultry and fish (with fins and scales) **Halal meat is from animals that have been killed according to muslim law	Many are vegetarian	Many are vegetarian or vegan	Many are vegetarian Some may be vegan
	Meat, poultry and fish Eggs	Meat, poultry and fish Milk and dairy Eggs	Meat, poultry and fish Eggs
Pork and pork products Shellfish or seafood without fins and scales	Beef and beef products Halal and kosher meats	Pork and pork products	
May also exclude gelatine, fats, emulsifiers, stabilisers and additives from animal origin that is not halal		Prefer to eat a pure and natural diet so may exclude coffee, tea, processed or canned and non-organic foods	May also exclude tea and coffee



Provision of food for those with allergies and intolerances

Food hypersensitivities – food allergies, food intolerances and coeliac disease – are a fact of life in the daily practice of Early Learning and Care providers. Food allergies in particular have increased in recent years, especially among young children. The symptoms of a mild food allergy reaction resemble those of hay fever or an upset stomach. However, if the food allergy is severe, the symptoms develop quickly and can be very serious, even life-threatening.

All food hypersensitivities are controlled in the same way: making sure the child does not come into contact with the foods they react to. There are two elements to achieving this:

1. Increasing the level of knowledge and awareness of food hypersensitivities, particularly food allergies, amongst staff members, and
2. Working with the parents / guardians of the children affected to draw up a management plan for each child to ensure their safety in the early learning environment.

It is important to assess the risk of exposure to the offending foods for each child with a food hypersensitivity. This will help you put in place the necessary mitigation steps to prevent this from happening. Your policies and procedures should reflect this and be clear and unambiguous so the staff will be confident in knowing what they have to do and how to do it. Open and ongoing communication with the staff, as well as the parent(s) / guardian(s), will go a long way to easing any concerns that staff may have.

The food provided for those with allergies must comply with the Standards. Guidance on allergies is available from <https://www.safefood.net/allergens>

Celebrations, trips and rewards

It is recognised that there are instances where the food provided varies due to the location or the nature of the occasion such as field trips and birthday celebrations. Food provided on these days still needs to comply with the Standards. Please consider non-food treats to mark these occasions.

Dealing with birthdays

It is important to celebrate and mark birthdays. Tips for dealing with them include:

- Mark the occasion with fun games and activities rather than foods.
- If a number of birthdays fall in the same week, consider marking them on the same day.
- If children regularly fill up on cakes and treat foods, they will have little room left for the nutritious food they need.

Rewards

Children love sweet ‘treats’ and it is tempting to use sweets such as marshmallows and jellies as a reward. This isn’t helpful to a child’s relationship with these foods as they soon learn to associate ‘treat’ foods with doing what is asked of them. In addition, when eaten between meals these foods are damaging to growing teeth.

Use stickers and other non-food items as a reward instead.



Appendix 1: Standards for 5 year olds and over

5 year olds

Older children have different *nutritional needs* and the serving sizes need to be adjusted accordingly.

Please refer to this list for advice on the appropriate serving size for this age group.

Meal: Breakfast

Food group: Wholemeal or wholegrain cereals and breads

One serving is:



2 thin slices of wholemeal bread.



1 cup of flaked type breakfast cereal - bran, crisped rice, toasted flakes of corn.



2 whole wheat cereal biscuits.



1/3 cup porridge oats.

Food group: Vegetables, salad and fruit

One serving is:



2 small fruits such as plums, kiwis, mandarins.



10 to 12 berries or grapes.



1 medium-sized fruit such as an apple, orange, pear or banana.



1 small carton or glass of unsweetened fruit juice (approximately 150ml).
Limit fruit juice to once a day.

Appendix 1: Standards for 5 year olds and over

Food group: Milk, yoghurt and cheese

One serving is:	
 1 glass (200ml) milk.	 1 bottle (200ml) yogurt drink (check labels for low-sugar varieties).
 1 carton (125g) yogurt.	 2 adult thumbs (25g) of hard (Cheddar type) or semi-hard (Edam) cheese.

Meal: Snack

Food group: Vegetables, salad and fruit

One serving is:	
 1 medium-sized fruit such as an apple, orange, pear, banana.	 8 carrots or celery sticks.
 2 small fruits such as plums, kiwis, mandarins.	 1 small carton or glass of unsweetened fruit juice (approximately 150ml). Limit fruit juice to once a day.
 10 to 12 berries or grapes.	

Food group: Milk, yogurt and cheese

One serving is:	
 1 glass (200ml) milk.	 1 bottle (200ml) yogurt drink (check labels for low-sugar varieties).
 1 carton (125g) yogurt.	 2 adult thumbs (25g) of hard (Cheddar type) or semi-hard (Edam) cheese.

Appendix 1: Standards for 5 year olds and over

Meal: Lunch or cold meal

Food group: Vegetables, salad and fruit

One serving is:



1 medium piece of fruit (an apple, banana, orange, pear).



1 bowl of salad.



2 small pieces of fruit (kiwi, plums, mandarin).



1 bowl of homemade vegetable soup.



10 to 12 berries or grapes.

Food group: cereals and breads

One serving is:



2 thin slices wholemeal bread.



1 pitta pocket.



1½ slices wholemeal soda bread.



1 small roll.

Food group: Meat, poultry, fish, egg, beans and nuts

One serving is:



50 to 75g cooked lean beef, lamb, pork, poultry, salmon or tuna.



Three-quarter cup of beans, peas, lentils.



2 eggs (1 egg is sufficient for lunch or cold meal).



40g unsalted nuts or seeds.

Appendix 1: Standards for 5 year olds and over

Meal: Dinner

Food group: Vegetables, salad and fruit

One serving is:	
 1 medium piece of fruit (an apple, banana, orange, pear).	 1 bowl of salad.
 2 small pieces of fruit (kiwi, plums, mandarin).	 1 bowl of homemade vegetable soup.
 10 to 12 berries or grapes.	

Food group: Potatoes, pasta and rice

One serving is:	
 1 cup of cooked pasta, rice or noodles.	 2 medium or 4 small potatoes.

Food group: Milk, yogurt and cheese

One serving is:	
 1 glass (200ml) milk.	 2 adult-sized thumbs (25g) of hard (Cheddar type) or semi-hard (Edam) cheese.
 1 carton (125g) yogurt.	

Appendix 1: Standards for 5 year olds and over

Food group: Meat, poultry, fish, egg, beans and nuts

One serving is:	
 50-75g cooked lean beef, lamb, pork, mince or poultry.	 2 eggs.
 100g cooked fish.	 40g unsalted nuts or seeds.
 Three-quarter cup of beans, peas, lentils.	

Notes



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

