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## Children's Nutrition & Heart Health

By Dietitian Caitlin Dillon-Smith



We know that diet influences the development of diseases.

Healthy eating habits from an early age can lower the risk of developing several deadly diseases later in life. A diet designed to lower the risk of heart disease, is one that benefits the whole family, adults and children alike. A heart-healthy diet in children lowers cholesterol, and if followed through adolescence and beyond, should reduce the risk of Cardiovascular Disease (CVD).

CVD is the leading cause of death in Australia. Most CVD is caused by the gradual narrowing or blockage of blood vessels due to the build-up of fatty deposits. For this reason, nutrition can play a key role in helping prevent heart disease.

Lifestyle- related risk factors for CVD

- Excess weight (overweight)
- Physical inactivity
- Unhealthy diet
- Smoking
- Excessive alcohol consumption
- High blood pressure
- High blood cholesterol.

Specially for childcare aged children, dietitians are skilled to provide practical strategies to assist with fussy eating behaviours and ensuring nutritional adequacy during this peak period of a child's growth and development.

## The role of parents/carers

Fortunately, parents and carers can positively influence their children's behaviour. Parents and carers must show by example.

It is important to support children from a young age by encouraging healthy eating & regular aerobic exercise, as well as discouraging smoking. Although children usually don't show the symptoms of CVD, the silent build-up of plaque (fatty deposits) can start in childhood and have a serious impact on their adult life.



## Healthy food, healthy hearts

Healthy eating is important in keeping our bodies healthy and strong. Children who grow up in families and environments (such as childcare centres) that enjoy a variety of nutritious foods are more likely to make their own healthy choices as they get older.

You can help support kids to have healthy hearts by:

1. Following the [Australia Dietary Guidelines](#) for children and adolescents
2. Select wholegrain rather than white/refined varieties of bread, pasta, noodles, breakfast cereals and rice.
3. Fill your plate with a variety of vegetables and eat fresh fruit daily
4. Consume healthy protein sources including fish, lean meat and poultry, legumes, nuts and seeds.
5. Choose reduced fat dairy such as unflavoured milk and yoghurt, and cheese (from age 2yrs and up only).

6. Consume healthy fat choices with nuts, seeds, avocados, olives and their oils for cooking (as safety permits).
7. Use herbs & spices to flavour food, instead of adding salt. High salt Diets increase your risk of hypertension & heart disease.
8. Eat less 'junk food' such as chips, cakes, lollies and ice-cream.
9. Make water the drink of choice instead of cordial, fruit drinks and soft drinks



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## Active kids

You can help prevent obesity in kids by encouraging them to be active in childcare centres and at home. Activities that involve movement/physical activity are highly beneficial. Limit kids sedentary activities: set time limits for TV watching, computer use and handheld computer games.



## Is there such a thing as 'Good Fats'?

YES! Healthier fats to include in your diet are called 'Unsaturated Fats' (polyunsaturated and monounsaturated) and actually help reduce your risk of CVD. The unhealthy fats to limit in your diet are called 'Saturated and Trans-Fats.' Too much unhealthy fat can raise your blood cholesterol levels – one of the risk factors for heart disease.

## Tips to help you enjoy healthy fats include:

- Cook with healthy fats like olive, canola, peanut or sesame oil
- Replace butter with table spread or avocado
- Eat fish, particularly oily fish like salmon, twice a week
- Snack on nuts, or add them to your salads and stir fries (as safety permits)
- Use nut and seed spreads, like peanut butter or tahini spreads

For great heart health recipe ideas, please visit: <https://www.heartfoundation.org.au/recipes>



Need help with making healthy lifestyle choices for the children in your care?

This article was written by Dietitian, Caitlin Dillon-Smith.

Please call or email **OSCAR** Care Group Dietitians via our contact details below.

## REFERENCES & LINKS

Nutrition Australia: Cardiovascular Health

Heart Foundation: Food & Nutrition

DAA: Best Fats for a healthy heart

Stanford Children's: Prevention of childhood heart disease

Eat for Health



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