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Limiting Processed Snacks for Kids & Healthy Snack Alternatives

Processed snacks are often convenient and tasty, but they are typically high in unhealthy fats, added sugars, and artificial additives, which can negatively affect a child's health. Limiting processed snacks helps children maintain a healthy weight, improve energy levels, and support their growth and development.

Some common processed snacks to avoid include:

- Packaged chips, cookies, and candy
- Sugary granola bars
- Pre-packaged crackers and popcorn
- Sugar-sweetened drinks

The Impact of Processed Snacks on Kids' Health:

1. **Excess Sugar & Empty Calories:** Many processed snacks contain high amounts of added sugar, which can lead to weight gain, cavities, and energy crashes.
2. **Low in Nutrients:** Processed snacks are often low in essential nutrients like fiber, vitamins, and minerals that kids need for proper growth and brain development.
3. **Increased Risk of Health Problems:** Regular consumption of processed snacks may increase the risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease.

Why Is Processed Snacks So Enticing to Kids?

They are designed to be highly appealing and "addictive" to kids for several reasons:

1. **Bright colors and fun shapes:** Many junk foods are visually designed to attract kids, often with bright packaging and shapes that are fun to eat.
2. **Convenience:** Junk food is easy to eat, portable, and often requires little to no preparation, making it a quick option for kids on the go.
3. **Advertising:** Junk food is often marketed specifically to children through catchy jingles, fun characters, and advertisements on TV or social media.
4. **Taste:** Salty, sugary, and fatty foods appeal to your child's taste buds and, yes, these foods can be pleasurable to eat. Taste buds develop as children grow. Young kids tend to reject the strong, pungent and sometimes bitter flavor of vegetables, especially if they were not exposed to a variety of flavors as an infant or if they happen to be a super taster. The taste of ultra-processed foods tends to be consistent. There are no surprises

for picky eaters, kids with restrictive food intake disorder, or kids with sensory issues who like predictable textures. An apple can look and taste different every time you offer it to your child, depending on the apple and how fresh it is. In comparison, packaged foods taste the same every time your child digs in.

These factors combine to make junk food highly enticing and hard for kids to resist.

Saying "No" to Processed Snacks: Tips for Parents

Saying "no" to junk food can be challenging, especially when your child is craving it, but it's important to maintain healthy eating habits. Here are some tips for parents:

1. **Offer Healthy Alternatives First:** Keep healthy snacks like fruit, nuts, and yogurt on hand so when hunger strikes, your child has options.
 2. **Model Healthy Eating:** Kids are more likely to eat healthy if they see you eating well. Enjoy fruits, veggies, and healthy snacks as a family.
 3. **Limit Junk Food at Home:** Keep junk food out of the house or at least in a place where it's not easily accessible to kids.
 4. **Create Healthy Habits Together:** Get the family involved in meal planning and snack preparation. The more your child participates, the more likely they are to enjoy healthy foods.
 5. **Don't Use Junk Food as a Reward:** Avoid using unhealthy foods as a reward for good behavior. This can create an unhealthy relationship with food.
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Top Tips for the Child Who Won't Eat Anything But "Junk Food"

If your child refuses to eat anything but junk food, it's not too late to turn it around. Create a positive food environment with a variety of healthy foods available that are not called "good" or "bad" and make ultra-processed foods predictably available. This will help you avoid mealtime meltdowns and stand-offs. It can be difficult when your child insists on eating only junk food, but there are ways to encourage healthier habits:

1. **Gradual Introduction:** Introduce healthier snacks slowly alongside familiar junk foods. For example, offer fruit with a small amount of chips or cookies. Over time, increase the portion of healthier options.
2. **Set Guidelines for Snacking:** Discuss the family rules for snacking between meals. Keep healthy, filling snacks available in the house so your kids and their friends have plenty of healthy options to choose from when they raid the pantry and refrigerator.
3. **Incorporate Junk Food Into Meals:** If your child loves pizza or burgers, try making healthier versions at home. Use whole-wheat crusts, lean meats, and plenty of veggies as toppings.
4. **Aim for Predictable Exposure :** Junk food shouldn't be labeled "bad" and banned from the house. That only makes junk food even more appealing to kids! The most effective way to help your little ones make good food choices at home is to consciously choose when to serve up these convenience items and work them into your overall meal plan.

5. **Create Fun, Healthy Meals:** Make meals interactive and fun by letting your child help prepare the food. Try making "fruit and veggie faces" on whole-grain toast or create a colorful salad.
 6. **Be Consistent, But Flexible:** It's okay to have treats occasionally, but make sure junk food is not a daily occurrence. Encourage balance, not perfection.
 7. **Educate Through Play:** Use fun activities like food-related games, books, or videos to teach your child about the importance of healthy eating and the effects of junk food on the body.
 8. **Give Your Child Some Autonomy:** Believe it or not, kids are more amenable to eating different types of food – even healthy foods – when they have a say in the matter. Offer your child two options to choose from. They will feel more independent and respected, and that may translate to healthier meals and snacks.
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Healthier Snack Alternatives

By preparing healthy, easy-to-make snacks at home, you can ensure your child is getting nourishing foods that support their health and well-being. Here are some quick and fun alternatives that kids will love:



Yogurt Parfaits

A delicious and nutritious snack that's also a fun, customizable treat.

Ingredients:

- 1/2 cup plain Greek yogurt
- 1/4 cup granola (look for a low-sugar variety)
- 1/4 cup mixed berries (blueberries, raspberries, or strawberries)
- 1 tablespoon chia seeds (optional)

Instructions:

- Layer yogurt, granola, and berries in a small jar or cup.
- Top with chia seeds for added fiber and omega-3s.

Health Benefits: Rich in protein, probiotics, and antioxidants to support gut health and boost the immune system.





Veggie & Cheese Snack Plates

A simple and crunchy snack that combines veggies with protein-rich cheese.

Ingredients:

- 1 small cucumber, sliced
- 1/2 cup baby carrots
- 1/4 cup cherry tomatoes
- 1-2 string cheese sticks or cheese cubes

Instructions:

- Arrange the veggies and cheese on a plate.
- Serve with a small portion of hummus or yogurt dip if desired.

Health Benefits: Provides fiber, vitamins, and minerals from the veggies, along with protein and calcium from the cheese.



Apple Slices with Almond Butter

A sweet and creamy snack that's full of healthy fats and protein.

Ingredients:

- 1 apple, sliced
- 2 tablespoons almond butter (or peanut butter)
- Optional: a sprinkle of cinnamon for extra flavor

Instructions:

- Slice the apple and serve with almond butter for dipping.
- Optional: Sprinkle cinnamon on top of the apple slices for a fun twist.

Health Benefits: High in fiber and healthy fats, which help keep kids full and satisfied



Frozen Banana Bites

A fun and cool snack that tastes like a treat but is full of healthy nutrients.

Ingredients:

- 2 ripe bananas
- 1/4 cup peanut butter or almond butter
- 1/4 cup mini dark chocolate chips (optional)

Instructions:

- Slice the bananas into bite-sized rounds.
- Spread peanut or almond butter on top of half the banana slices.
- Top with another slice of banana to make "sandwiches."
- Freeze for 1 hour and enjoy as a frozen treat.

Health Benefits: Bananas provide potassium, and the nut butter adds healthy fats and protein to keep kids full.

Remember

Developing a healthy relationship with food starts early, and it's all about balance. You don't need to eliminate all processed foods, but aim to limit ultra-processed junk foods and focus on whole, nutritious options to fuel your child's body and mind for growth and success!



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