

PLANNING MEALS FOR TODDLERS

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LEARNING POINTS

- 1 Menu planning can help to establish a pattern of nutritionally balanced family meals and snacks
- 2 A combination of foods from the five food groups within a daily menu plan provides a balanced diet for the whole family
- 3 Planning menus in advance can save money and reduce food preparation time
- 4 Using fruits and vegetables when in season in the UK can also reduce food costs
- 5 With good planning and a well stocked kitchen, balanced meals can be easily put together
- 6 Always offering two courses at the main meals - a savoury course and a nutritious pudding based on fruit - enhances enjoyment of meals and widens the range of nutrients included
- 7 Simple substitution of foods within the same food group ensures a nutritional balance when planned foods are unavailable on the day
- 8 Toddlers who are fussy or faddy eaters may not consume all the foods on the planned menu and must be offered something their parents know they will eat, as well as foods being eaten by others.

PLANNING MEALS FOR TODDLERS

Looking ahead and planning a menu can be an economic and efficient way of ensuring that toddlers receive a nutritionally balanced diet every day. Menus for toddlers may be for family meals or for meals in early years settings, such as nurseries or play groups.

A well planned menu will provide meals and snacks with foods from all the food groups. It will make budgeting, ordering and shopping for food quick and easy, and help parents plan time for cooking and preparing food. Relaxed and happy family mealtimes provide an opportunity for toddlers to learn to like a wide range of foods.

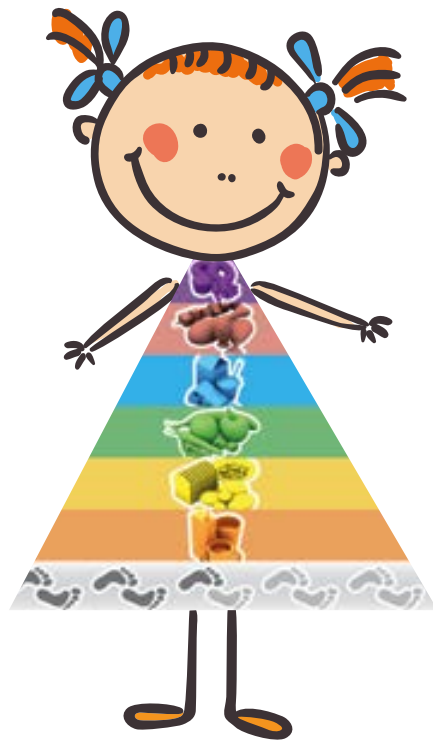
When planning a menu:

- aim for a balance of nutritious foods and drinks from the five food groups as recommended in [Factsheet 1.2](#) – see Table 1 for serving frequencies of the food groups
- offer two courses at main meals and a drink with all meals and snacks – tap water is a good choice
- choose appropriate foods according to:
 - budget and accessibility of foods
 - cooking/food preparation skills
 - food preparation time and equipment available
 - children's preferences for how food is served to them
 - cultural habits and traditions of families
 - food allergy and intolerance[See Factsheets 4.2 & 4.3](#)
- a limit on sweet foods and drinks to three meals and one snack per day [See Factsheet 4.5](#)
- offer appropriate portion sizes for the different age groups [See Factsheet 1.3](#)
- consider the preferences of everyone the menu is designed to cater for - when young children are involved in menu planning they can help with the shopping and food preparation and they can look forward to the meals or snacks they have helped to plan and prepare.

FAMILY MEALS

Encouraging families to eat together as often as possible has the following benefits:

- Parents can role model eating habits and food preferences that they wish their toddlers to learn
- Toddlers can see their parents and siblings eating the nutritious foods that parents would like them to learn to enjoy, particularly fruit and vegetables
- Eating together can be a happy time for the whole family, when toddlers can enjoy their parent's attention.



Tot It Up: A resource for parents to assess the balance of foods being eaten: see www.infantandtoddlerforum.org

TABLE 1: EXAMPLES OF FOODS FROM EACH OF THE FIVE FOOD GROUPS WITH RECOMMENDED SERVING FREQUENCIES See Factsheets 1.2 & 1.3

FOOD GROUP				
1: Bread, rice potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods	2: Fruit and vegetables	3: Milk, cheese and yogurt	4: Meat, fish, eggs, nuts, and pulses	5: Foods high in fat and sugar
SERVING FREQUENCY				
Include at all meals and in some snacks	Include at all meals and in some snacks	3 times during the day	Twice each day or 3 times for vegetarians. Offer fish twice per week including one serving of oily fish	Small amounts to add flavour interest and enjoyment. Sugary foods should be limited to 3 meals and 1 snack per day
EXAMPLES				
Bread or bread rolls	Fresh fruit in slices or pieces	Glass of milk as a drink or on cereal	Cooked meat – plain or in sauces, stews or pies	Butter and margarine
Crackers, crisp bread, rice cakes, bread sticks	Tinned fruit in juice	Flavoured milk drinks such as strawberry milk or hot chocolate	Cold cooked meats e.g. left over roasted meat, slices of ham, salami	Oil and fat for cooking
Pitta bread, chapatti, wraps, flat bread, tortilla	Dried fruit	Hard cheese cubes	White fish as in fish pies or fish cakes or filets of fish	Pastry
Naan bread	Fruit salad	Grated cheese	Tinned fish mixed with mayonnaise and plain yogurt e.g. tuna, sardines, salmon	Puddings, ice cream, sorbets
Breakfast cereals	Fruit coulis as a fruit sauce	Cream cheese or cheese spread	Smoked fish filets e.g. mackerel, salmon, trout	Sweet spreads such as jam and honey
Rice – hot or as salad	Cooked fruit in a pudding e.g. fruit pie or crumble	Cheese slices, straws or triangles	Meat or fish pates or pastes, taramasalata, liver pate	Cakes, biscuits and pastry snacks
Potatoes - boiled, mashed, baked, roasted, wedges, chips	Raw vegetable sticks or slices	Yogurt or fromage frais	Eggs - boiled, poached, scrambled, fried, omelettes	Sweet drinks e.g. well diluted fruit juices and squashes - 1 part juice to about 5-10 parts water
Pasta or couscous - hot or as salad	Roasted or stir fried vegetables	Custard	Lentils, dhal, chick peas, hummus and other starchy beans	Sauces e.g. cream, mayonnaise, gravy, tomato ketchup
	Boiled or steamed vegetables	Milk puddings e.g. rice pudding	Gram flour in bhajis and pakora	
	Vegetable soups		Ground or crushed nuts added to muesli, puddings, cakes or biscuits	
			Peanut butter	

EXAMPLES OF MENU PLANS

The following menu plans for family meals and snacks for toddlers (Tables 2 and 3) include three meals: breakfast, a light meal and a family meal. The family routine will determine whether the family meal is in the middle of the day or in the evening.

The foods are colour-coded, as in Table 1, to show how the five food groups are included. Some foods contribute to more than one food group and are therefore multicoloured to reflect that.

A drink of about 100-120mls (3-4ozs) should be offered with each meal and snack. Tap water is a good choice, although milk has been included at some meals and snacks in Tables 2 and 3 as it contributes towards the three servings of milk, cheese or yogurt per day.

Sweet foods have been included in the three meals and only one snack per day to limit the sugar intake and to limit the number of occasions that teeth are exposed to sugar to a maximum of four times per day.

When foods within a menu plan are not available on the day, choose a substitute food from the same food group as the unavailable food.

Some toddlers going through the normal stages of development may narrow down the range of foods they are prepared to eat.

See Factsheets 2.1, 2.2 & 2.3 These toddlers should always be offered a food they like at each meal and snack, as well as the foods on the menu for the family. Over time, by watching the rest of the family, their carers or peer group eating the foods on the menu they will eventually try the foods they are wary of.

Care also needs to be taken with serving food to these toddlers. Some are happy with foods mixed together on one plate, whilst others prefer to eat dry foods without sauces. Some toddlers even prefer each of the foods to be kept separate and not touching the other foods on the plate.

Example of a light meal



First course



Second course



Drink

TABLE 2: SAMPLE MENU FOR SEVEN DAYS SHOWING THE BALANCED CONTRIBUTION OF THE FIVE FOOD GROUPS

Days 1-4 use vegetables and fruit in season in spring/summer. Days 5-7 use vegetables and fruit that are in season in autumn/winter.

	Breakfast	Light meal	Family meal	Snacks*
DAY 1				
1st course	Weetabix™ with milk	Baked beans on toast Cucumber sticks	Shepherd's pie with green beans	1. Breadsticks with cheese cubes 2. Pancakes
2nd course	Peach slices	Fruit salad with yogurt	Chocolate mousse with strawberries	
Drink	Milk	Water	Water	
DAY 2				
1st course	Muesli with milk	Mini pizza Sliced peppers sticks	Salmon and potato fish cakes	1. Oatcakes with hummus dip and cucumber slices 2. Scone with butter and jam
2nd course	Raspberries	Mini muffin and apricot slices	Rhubarb crumble with custard	
Drink	Milk	Milk	Water	
DAY 3				
1st course	Toasted hot cross bun with butter	Tuna pasta bake with sweet corn Broccoli	Grilled sausage, mashed potato and peas	1. Peanut butter sandwich 2. Carrot cake and cup of milk
2nd course	Melon pieces	Mixed berries and ice cream	Yogurt and stoned cherries	
Drink	Hot chocolate	Water	Water	
DAY 4				
1st course	Boiled egg with toast fingers Blueberries	Ham sandwich, cucumber and courgette sticks	Pasta with tomato sauce and grated cheese Carrot sticks	1. Kiwi fruit slices and a cup of milk 2. Toasted tea bread with butter
2nd course		Plain biscuit and nectarine slices	Melon and fromage frais	
Drink	Water	Water	Water	
DAY 5				
1st course	Wholegrain cereal with milk	Chicken nuggets and potato wedges Carrot sticks	Fish and potato pie and roasted vegetables	1. Banana 2. Slice of date and walnut loaf
2nd course	Grapes	Blackberries with yogurt	Apple sponge pudding and custard	
Drink	Milk	Water	Water	
DAY 6				
1st course	Porridge with sultanas, honey and milk	Toast with chicken liver pate Celery sticks	Chicken and vegetable curry and rice Roasted parsnip sticks	1. Mini muffin and raw apple slices 2. Crackers with butter and Marmite™ and a cup of milk
2nd course		Shortbread biscuit and orange segments	Cooked plums with fromage frais	
Drink	Milk	Water	Water	
DAY 7				
1st course	Scrambled egg with toast fingers	Vegetable soup with garlic bread	Roast lamb, roast potatoes and cauliflower	1. Honey sandwich 2. Cheese cubes and crackers
2nd course	Pear slices	Plain biscuit and clementine segments	Apple and blackberry crumble and custard	
Drink	Water	Milk	Water	

* Served with water to drink where milk is not specified.

TABLE 3: MEAL PLAN FOR VEGETARIANS – TODDLERS NOT EATING MEAT OR FISH

Eggs, nuts and pulses are included three times per day to ensure adequate iron for toddlers. This menu can be adapted for any season by adding in the seasonal fruit and vegetables found in the table on page 9.

	Breakfast	Light meal	Family meal	Snacks*
DAY 1				
1st course	Porridge with dried fruit	Mushroom omelette Toast fingers and cherry tomatoes	Lentil burgers, potato wedges and vegetables	1. Peanut butter sandwich 2. Crackers and Marmite™
2nd course	Milk	Fruit cake	Apple crumble with custard	
Drink	Milk	Milk	Water	
DAY 2				
1st course	Boiled egg with toast fingers Grapes	Mini pizza topped with tomato and diced peppers Carrot sticks	Chick pea falafel Roast butternut squash and roast parsnips	1. Onion bhajis 2. Bread sticks and a cup of milk
2nd course		Bakewell tart and fruit slices	Fruit with yogurt	
Drink	Water	Water	Water	
DAY 3				
1st course	Muesli with extra chopped walnuts and milk	Baked beans on toast Cucumber sticks	Rice and dhal Stir fried vegetables	1. Toasted tea bread with butter 2. Oat cakes and cheese cubes
2nd course	Fresh fruit slices	Apple slices and a plain biscuit	Fruit pie with custard	
Drink	Milk	Water	Water	
DAY 4				
1st course	Scrambled egg with toast fingers	Hummus with bread sticks Vegetable sticks	Bean and vegetable curry and rice Broccoli	1. Date and walnut loaf and a cup of milk 2. Scone with butter and jam
2nd course	Kiwi fruit slices	Tangerine segments with a chocolate biscuit	Yogurt Pear slices	
Drink	Water	Milk	Water	

* Served with water to drink where milk is not specified.

Example of a light meal



First course



Second course



Drink

DIFFERENT WAYS OF PLANNING MEALS AND SNACKS

Planning ahead allows consideration of the nutritional quality and variety of foods to be purchased for meals and snacks. Families can do this in different ways:

- Some families may plan menus a day or several days in advance and make a shopping list. The advantage is that some foods can be prepared ahead of time and frozen or refrigerated for busier times when there is minimal preparation time available
- Other families prefer to put together meals or snacks just before mealtimes. For these families it is more appropriate to keep a store of suitable foods in the cupboard, fridge or freezer that can be readily accessed. Families may do this through a regular weekly shop, to stock up on the foods and drinks they use routinely.

SUGGESTIONS FOR A GOOD STORE OF NUTRITIOUS FOODS

CUPBOARDS			
Bread or bread rolls	Tinned sweet corn	Tinned fruit in water	Tinned tuna in water or oil
Breakfast muffins	Tinned tomatoes	Dried fruit	Tinned salmon in water or oil
Wraps/tortillas	Tomato based pasta sauces	Onions and garlic	Tinned baked beans
Pitta or naan breads	Tomato puree	Pesto	Lentils
Crackers, rice cakes or crisp bread	Selection of herbs and spices including oregano, bay leaves, cinnamon, ground ginger, ground cumin, ground coriander, turmeric		Dry or tinned chickpeas, or other pulses
Breadsticks			
Breakfast cereals – fortified with iron and vitamins	Potatoes	Honey/Syrup/Maple syrup	Ground or crushed nuts e.g. ground almonds
Oats or Ready Brek™	Rice	Jam	Peanut butter
Flour – plain and self-raising	Pasta	Sugar	Marmite™/Vegemite™
Breadcrumbs	Couscous	Oils for cooking: rapeseed or soya	Stock cubes
		Oils for dressings and salads: olive, soya, walnut	
FRIDGE			
Milk	Carrots	Eggs	Stir fry noodles
Yogurt and fromage frais	Selection of other fresh vegetables	Sliced cold meat such as ham, chicken, turkey, beef	Butter and/or margarine
Cheese	Selection of fresh fruits	Fresh meat and fish	
Cream cheese	Lemons or limes	Meat pate	Mayonnaise
	Root ginger		
FREEZER			
Bread	Green beans	Spinach	Chicken – breasts or thighs
Bread rolls	Sweet corn	Mixed vegetables	Frozen fish fillets, fish cakes or fish fingers
Peas	Broccoli	Frozen summer berries	Ice cream



TIPS ON BUDGETING

- Some low income families that are entitled to Healthy Start vouchers are able to use their food vouchers to buy fresh fruit, fresh and frozen vegetables and milk. They also receive coupons for free vitamin supplements: www.healthystart.nhs.uk
- Fresh fruits, vegetables, meat and fish are generally cheaper and have more flavour when they are bought in season. However some popular foods in the UK are now offered all year round and many families are unaware of when foods are in season
- Market stalls may sell fresh fruit and vegetables more cheaply than shops and supermarkets
- Most frozen vegetables, fruit, meat and fish are good value when fresh equivalents are out of season
- Multibuy offers may not always be the best value – it is worth checking the cost of a single item and the cost of alternatives
- Multibuy offers are often for low-nutrient foods such as cakes, biscuits and poor quality meat products. They may appear to be good value for money but are rarely of good nutritional value and an excess of them in the home may replace more nutritious foods for toddlers
- Multibuy offers that are usually good value include:
 - dry foods such as dried fruit, couscous, pasta
 - tinned foods such as baked beans, other tinned beans, tinned fish.

SEASONAL FOODS IN THE UK

Seasonal Vegetables		Seasonal Fruit
SPRING Months in the UK: March, April, May		
Asparagus Broccoli Carrots Jersey Royal new potatoes Purple sprouting broccoli Radishes	Rocket Sorrel Spinach Spring onions Watercress	Cherries Kiwi fruit Lemons Oranges Rhubarb
SUMMER Months in the UK: June, July, August		
Artichoke Aubergine Beetroot Broad beans Broccoli Carrots Courgettes Cucumber Fennel French beans Garlic Kohlrabi Mange tout	Marrow New potatoes Onions Peas Peppers Potatoes Radishes Rocket Runner beans Sorrel Tomatoes Turnips Watercress	Apricots Blackberries Blueberries Damsons Figs Gooseberries Greengages Kiwi fruit Loganberries Melons Nectarines Peaches Plums Raspberries Redcurrants Strawberries
AUTUMN Months in the UK: September, October, November		
Artichoke Aubergine Beetroot Broccoli Butternut squash Carrots Celeriac Celery Fennel Kale Kohlrabi Leeks Marrow	Onions Parsnips Peppers Potatoes Pumpkin Radishes Rocket Swede Sweet corn Tomatoes Turnips Watercress Wild mushrooms	Apples Blackberries Chestnuts Cranberries Damsons Figs Grapes Pears Quince
WINTER Months in the UK: December, January, February		
Beetroot Brussel sprouts Cauliflower Celeriac Celery Chicory Jerusalem artichoke Kale	Leeks Parsnips Potatoes Pumpkin Purple sprouting broccoli Swede Turnips	Apples Chestnuts Clementines Cranberries Lemons Oranges Pears Rhubarb Satsumas Tangerines

TIPS TO REDUCE TIME IN FOOD PREPARATION

Convenience food

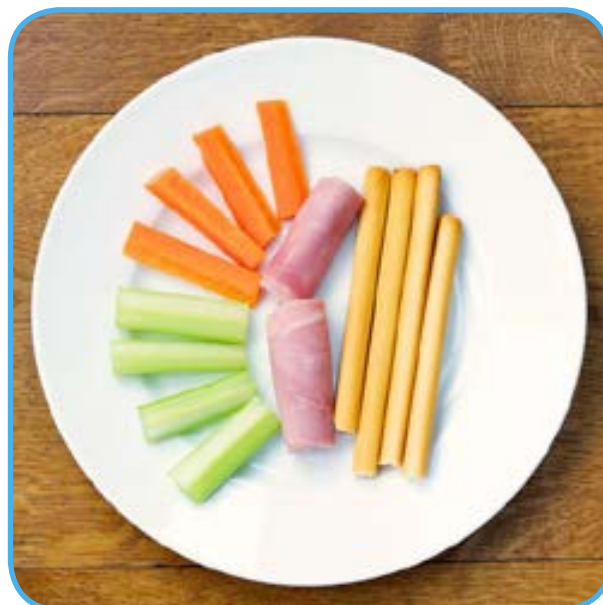
Some busy families buy a lot of convenience foods to save time. These foods are usually higher in salt and lower in nutrients than home cooked foods. Good choices of convenience food are listed in [Factsheet 1.9](#).

When ready meals are bought, serving smaller portions and adding extra raw, or lightly steamed, vegetables will enhance the meal nutritionally and reduce the overall fat, salt and energy content.

Fresh seasonal fruit cut into pieces can be served with yogurt, fromage frais, ice cream, a small cake or a biscuit to make a quickly prepared second course. Fruit tinned in its own juice or in water can be used in place of fresh fruit as a cheaper option. Fruit tinned in syrup has a lot of added sugar and is not suitable for toddlers.

Packaged pre-cut fruit and vegetables are quick and easy but may have lower vitamin contents than those prepared in the home just before the meal.

Some parents buy convenience food because they lack cooking skills. Providing accessible cooking classes is appreciated by parents and can promote healthy eating in the home.



Light meal, first course.

Home-cooked food

When cooking at home, the time spent preparing food can be reduced by:

- cooking a double or triple quantity of food and freezing the extra so that it will only need to be thawed in the fridge and then heated for a second or third meal
- adding chopped leftover meat or fish or a tin of precooked pulses to stir fried vegetables to serve with pasta or rice.

Cold meals can be just as nutritious as hot meals and take less preparation time. With a well stocked kitchen many cold savoury courses can be prepared quickly by just putting a food from three or four of the Food Groups **1, 2, 3** and **4** together on a plate. Alternatively a single food or mixtures of two or three foods can be used as fillings for sandwiches, tortillas and pitta breads or as toppings on toast, crackers, rice cakes or crisp bread.

[See Factsheet 1.6](#) for ideas for such meals.

ASSESSING A MENU PLAN

To assess the nutritional adequacy of a one-day menu for toddlers, check whether all the criteria below are met:

- Three meals
- Two snacks
- Six to eight drinks with one at each meal and snack
- Two courses at each main meal
- Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta or other starchy foods at each meal and some snacks
- Fruit and vegetables at each meal and some snacks
- Three servings of milk, cheese or yogurt
- Two to three servings of meat, fish, eggs, nuts or pulses

- Some high fat, high sugar foods are included for flavour and enjoyment of meals
- Sweet foods and drinks are only offered to a maximum of four times per day
- A supplement of vitamins A & D is included.
[See Factsheets 4.7](#)

Table 4, below can be used to assess a menu plan. As meals and snacks include a mixture of the food groups, it can be helpful to list all the foods and drinks planned to be used in the left hand column of the table and mark which food groups they come from in the columns to the right. All the marks in each column can then be added up and compared with all the totals in the bottom row. Where there are differences between the totals and the recommendations, changes can be made to the menu to improve its balance and nutritional quality.

TABLE 4: ASSESSMENT OF A MENU PLAN

This uses Day 1 of Table 2 as the example

FOODS AND DRINKS	FOOD GROUP					DRINKS
	1: Bread, rice potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods	2: Fruit and vegetables	3: Milk, cheese and yogurt	4: Meat, fish, eggs, nuts, and pulses	5: Foods high in fat and sugar	
BREAKFAST						
Weetabix™ with milk	1		1/2			
Peach slices		1				
Cup of milk			1			1
SNACK						
Breadsticks with cheese cubes and water to drink	1		1			1
LIGHT MEAL						
Baked beans on toast	1	1		1		
Cucumber sticks						
Fruit salad with yogurt		1	1			
Water to drink						1
SNACK						
Pancakes and water to drink	1				1	1
FAMILY MEAL						
Shepherd's pie with green beans	1	1		1		
Chocolate mousse with strawberries		1			1	
Water to drink						1
Extra drink of water						1
TOTALS						
	5	5	3 1/2	2	2	6
Recommended	At each meal and some snacks or 3-5	At each meal and some snacks or 5+	3	2-3	Some high fat foods	6-8 glasses of about 100-120mls

PLANNING MEALS FOR TODDLERS GUIDANCE & TIPS FOR PARENTS



A well planned menu will provide meals and snacks with foods from all the food groups. It will make budgeting and shopping for food quick and easy, and help you plan time for cooking and preparing food.

Planning ahead

- Make a list of meals and snacks and/or stock up on nutritious foods so that you can put together a meal in minutes
- Save money by just buying the foods for nutritious meals and snacks in your menu plan
- Involve your toddler in planning, shopping and preparing food
- Include foods from each of the five food groups each day:
 - starchy foods at each meal and in some snacks
 - fruit and vegetables at all meals and in some snacks
 - milk, cheese and yogurt three times over the day
 - meat, fish, eggs, nuts or pulses two or three times each day (serve fish twice per week - one of which is oily fish)
 - only very small amounts of food high in fat and sugar.

Suggestions for a good store of nutritious foods so that you can put together a meal in minutes

Reducing food preparation time

- Cook a double or triple quantity of food and freeze the extra so that it can later be thawed in the fridge and then heated for a second or third meal
- Add leftover meat, fish or a tin of cooked lentils or beans to stir fried vegetables. They can be served with pasta, rice or noodles
- Add some extra raw or lightly cooked vegetables to a convenience meal
- Serve some fruit with yogurt, fromage frais, ice cream, a small cake or a biscuit to make a nutritious pudding.

Cold meals can be just as nutritious as hot cooked meals and can be prepared quickly and easily using simple ingredients from the five food groups.

Budgeting

- Fresh seasonal fruit, vegetables, meat and fish are usually cheaper than those out of season
- Frozen vegetables, fruit, meat and fish are often cheaper than fresh, especially when they are out of season
- Buy small amounts of foods high in fat and sugar, not multipacks
- Join the Healthy Start scheme if you are on a low income, and you will receive vouchers for fruit, vegetables and milk and coupons for free vitamin supplements:
www.healthystart.nhs.uk

CUPBOARDS			
Bread or bread rolls	Tinned sweet corn	Tinned fruit in water	Tinned tuna in water or oil
Breakfast muffins	Tinned tomatoes	Dried fruit	Tinned salmon in water or oil
Wraps/tortillas	Tomato based pasta sauces	Onions and garlic	Tinned baked beans
Pitta or naan breads	Tomato puree	Pesto	Lentils
Crackers, rice cakes or crisp bread	Selection of herbs and spices including oregano, bay leaves, cinnamon, ground ginger, ground cumin, ground coriander, turmeric		Dry or tinned chickpeas, or other pulses
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Breakfast cereals – fortified with iron and vitamins	Rice	Jam	Peanut butter
Oats or Ready Brek™	Pasta	Sugar	Marmite™/Vegemite™
Flour – plain and self- raising	Couscous	Oils for cooking: rapeseed or soya	Stock cubes
Breadcrumbs		Oils for dressings and salads: olive, soya, walnut	
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FREEZER			
Bread	Green beans	Spinach	Chicken – breasts or thighs
Bread rolls	Sweet corn	Mixed vegetables	Frozen fish fillets, fish cakes or fish fingers
Peas	Broccoli	Frozen summer berries	Ice cream

For personalised analysis of toddlers' food intake and activity levels, use the Infant & Toddler Forum's Tot It Up calculator www.infantandtoddlerforum.org/toddler-food-calculator

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Feeding young children:
practical advice from experts

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