

Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP)



## GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

# Healthy Eating and Junk Food

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### 10 FAQs on HEALTHY EATING AND JUNK FOOD

1. What is junk food? How much and how often junk food can be allowed for a child in a week?
2. As working parents, we are dependent on breads, cheese, cornflakes, etc. Are they healthy?
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6. I have started adding milk supplements to my toddler's milk. I heard in TV that they give lot of energy, vitamins, and minerals. Is this true? What is the right age to give?
7. We prepare all sorts of delicacies such as pizza, burger, *samosa*, *kulfi*, etc., at home. Are they still junk food? Are traditional foods such as *halwa*, *poori*, and *sewaiyaan* also junk food?
8. Which oil should be used to cook food? Is it good to prepare food in *desi* ghee and butter? What is recycling of oil?
9. My child is not ready to eat home food. What should I do?
10. My 14-year-old son takes lot of tea and coffee (four to five cups per day), especially during examination time to stay awake but still feels sleepy. Some of his friends have suggested some energy drinks for the same but I am very apprehensive about it. Please guide me what is right for him.

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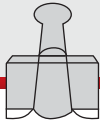
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# Healthy Eating and Junk Food



## Q1. What is junk food? How much and how often junk food can be allowed for a child in a week?

Junk food comprises of foods high in dietary fats, sugar, salt, or those which are nutritionally inappropriate. Most of the ultra-processed foods (foods that are commercially prepared by mixing several ingredients and adding additives such as sugars, flavors, and colors) are junk foods as either they are nutritionally poor or high in sugar, salt, or fat. Sugar-sweetened beverages, carbonated drinks, and caffeine-containing drinks are also categorized as unhealthy foods under the broad acronym **JUNCS** (**J**unk foods, **U**ltra-

processed foods, **N**utritionally inappropriate foods, **C**affeinated/colored/carbonated foods/beverages, and **S**ugar-sweetened beverages). **Table 1** lists the common junk foods.

Children and adolescents should avoid consumption of foods and beverages categorized as JUNCS, as far as possible. Alternatively, limit consumption of these foods at home/outside to not more than one serving per week; serving not exceeding 50% of total daily calorie requirement for that age.

**TABLE 1:** Commonly consumed Junk Foods.

Ultra-processed food	Packaged breakfast cereals, ready breads, instant noodles, commercial ice creams and flavored yoghurts, margarine, milk supplements, packaged snacks and chips
Restaurant food	Pizzas, burgers, French fries, noodles, pastas
Beverages	Carbonated drinks, fruit drinks (packaged juices with added sugar), flavored drinks, energy drinks, sugar sweetened beverages



Q2

**As working parents, we are dependent on breads, cornflakes, etc. Are they healthy?**

Many parents look for quick solutions to feeding the children, especially when both are working. Most of the ready-to-eat foods are not as healthy as they are often claimed to be. Some of the examples to explain this fact are as follows:

Cornflakes have a low-fat content, but the sugar, flavor, and corn syrup added to the flakes make it an unhealthy choice. Cornflakes are made up of malt, fructose corn syrup, and sugar, which make them very high in refined sugars. Corn syrup used in corn flakes has been found to have high levels of fructose in them. They might be low in fat but the sugar content promotes fat storage.

Similarly, bread is relatively low in essential nutrients. It is rather high in calories and carbs but low in protein, fat, fiber, vitamins, and minerals. Its excessive intake, especially white bread containing simple carbohydrates, can lead to unwarranted weight gain and predisposition to chronic ailments such as diabetes and heart disease. Even most brown breads predominantly have refined flour and are processed in same way as white bread.

Q3

**How is junk food harmful to body?**

Junk food can be harmful in many ways; some problems may appear early and others in due course of time.

- Most of these foods have poor nutritional quality due to high carbohydrate and fat content. Mostly they are high in sugar or salt as well. On the contrary, they are low in proteins, vitamins, minerals, and other micronutrients. This nutritionally imbalanced diet often leads to rapid weight gain and obesity. As the intake continues over a longer duration, it may affect the lipid profile of the body thereby predisposing to more severe illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure.
- Some of the additives used in ultra-processed foods may also increase the risk of cancer.
- Microbial contamination due to poor hygiene can lead to gastrointestinal infections such as diarrhea, typhoid, and hepatitis.
- High sugar content of junk foods and drinks may lead to dental caries.
- Food additives and coloring agents may cause allergies.
- Caffeinated drinks cause increase in the heart rate and sometimes abnormal rhythm of heartbeat.
- Regular over consumption of caffeinated drinks may cause psychiatric and sleep disturbances.



**Q4**

**What are healthy food options for babies, toddlers, and young children?**

All babies till 6 months of age should be exclusively breastfed. Any sorts of *ghutti*, water, top milk, honey, juices, or tea are not permitted. Beyond 6 months, some common homemade food options are provided in **Table 2**.

**TABLE 2:** Common homemade food options.

**For infants 6 months to 1 year**

Khichri, dalia, sooji kheer, mashed potatoes/banana/boiled vegetables, upma, mashed idli, and curd

**For toddlers and children**

Dal, rice, chapatti, vegetables, curd, chilla (dal and besan), egg, fruits, idli-dosa with homemade batter, upma/seviyaan/poha (with vegetables), milk fruit smoothies without sugar, cooked beans, and roasted/boiled chicken/fish

These are just some of the examples. Fresh homemade foods, low in sugar, salt and saturated fats, and high in proteins should be preferred.

**What should be the energy intake from various types of foods?**

Total calories in a healthy meal should be divided as 15–30% from fats, 10–15% from proteins, and 55–75% from carbohydrates. Free sugars should be <5% and there should not be any trans fat. Recommended salt intake up to 12 months is <1 g salt, 1–3 years <2 g, 4–6 years <3 g, 7–10 years <5 g, and for ≥11 years 6 g per day.



Q5

**My baby likes juices and shakes. Are they healthy and how much can I give?**

Pre-packaged juices and shakes are not healthy foods to be offered to children. Regarding juices, it is always better to give whole fruit rather than fruit juice. Eating whole fruit has advantages, including more fiber content, more nutrient content, and lesser chances of microbial contamination, which can happen while extracting juices. Regarding how much juice to give, the recommendations are:

- Fruit juices should not be offered to children less than 2 years.
- For children 2-5 years, up to 125 mL of only fresh homemade fruit juices with no added sugars can be given, per day.
- In children older than 5 years, the amount can be increased till 250 mL per day, but it should be fresh, homemade, and without added sugars.

Canned and packaged fruit juices are not advisable. For milk-shakes, whole fruit mashed with milk at home without any added sugar can be given but milkshake powders or juice extracts should not be used. The best beverage to offer any child is clean pure water.



## Q6

**I have started adding milk supplements to my toddler's milk. I heard that they give lot of energy, vitamins, and minerals. Is this true? What is the right age to give them?**

Malt-based milk supplements are very commonly used in India. While the primary ingredient is malt, mostly barley, or cereal derivative, the secondary ingredient is invariably high content of sugar. It is the free sugar which becomes a matter of concern for us. It is not only addictive but leads to all associated problems such as weight gain, dental caries, and risk for chronic lifestyle-related ailments.

Milk supplements belong to ultra-processed food category and should best be avoided. Advertising has often portrayed the supplements as full of energy, vitamins, and minerals. The quantities of micronutrients present in these drinks may give some benefit to children who have their deficiency, but have no role in healthy kids. Even for providing the vitamins and minerals, the same amount can easily be obtained from other foods which are not only cheaper but also do not have associated ill effects as with these drinks. Results of improved calcium clearly indicate that it is just the milk that was responsible for it.

## Q7

**We prepare all sorts of delicacies such as pizza, burger, samosa, and kulfi at home. Are they still junk food? Are traditional foods such as halwa, poori, and sewaiyaan also junk food?**

Any food which is high in fat content, especially saturated fat and trans fats (produced from chemical process of hydrogenation of vegetable oil), sugars, and salts is considered as junk food. These foods are high in calorie and fats, and low in nutritional value. However, these are still better than similar foods available in market as there are no colors, preservatives, and taste enhancers in home-cooked food, and children tend to eat them in limited quantity as against ultra-processed foods which are usually consumed in higher quantity due to their taste, color, and flavor. Home-made foods can be made slightly healthier by following modifications:

- Maintain hygiene to decrease chances of microbial contamination, so less risk of infections
- Avoid reuse of pre-heated and used oil
- Restrict sugar and salt content
- Less refined products can be used like whole wheat flour instead of *maida* and jaggery instead of refined sugar
- Avoid using preservatives and colors

Q8

**Which oil should be used to cook food?  
Is it good to prepare food in *desi* ghee  
and butter?**

You can use the same oil which is being used to cook food for other family members. No single oil/fat has an ideal composition, and hence a frequent change of oils between groundnut oil, mustard oil, and soyabean oil is preferred. Some people also use olive oil.

If we are using the same used oil repeatedly for cooking, it increases the component of trans fat which is unhealthy and very harmful for the body. Thus, reusing the oil that has been earlier used for frying should be avoided.

Yes, we can use a bit of *desi* ghee or butter in preparing food to make it healthy and palatable but we should keep the fact in mind that per day saturated fat should constitute <10% of total energy intake.

Q9

**My child is not ready to eat home food.  
What should I do?**

This is a common problem that many parents face. In first place, we should try to avoid initial introduction of junk food so that children do not get addicted to their taste and flavor, thereby decreasing dependency on these foods. For parents whose children have already crossed this stage, and are now fussy eaters to healthy food, the following tips may be used to overcome their dependency:

- Stay calm, do not get angry or shout.
- Do not try force feeding.
- Keep healthy food around; do not get junk food at home.
- Be a role model. Children are silent observers; they will follow what you do.
- Start with introduction of just one healthy food at one time. Introduce in a cheerful way.
- Make taste and appearance modifications in healthy foods.
- Avoid intermittent snacking.
- Involve child in preparing and serving meal or snack.



Q10

My 14-year-old son takes lot of tea and coffee (four to five cups per day), especially during examination time to stay awake but still feels sleepy. Some of his friends have suggested some energy drinks for the same but I am very apprehensive about it. Please guide me what is right for him.

Tea, coffee, and energy drinks are basically caffeine-containing drinks. Often children tend to take these drinks to stay awake and feel more energetic. However, excessive caffeine intake can lead to serious consequences such as increase in heart rate or abnormal rhythm of heart beats. It may also lead to other disturbances such as poor sleep, restlessness, anxiety, depression, and tremors.



No caffeinated or carbonated drink should be consumed by children <5-year-old. In school-going children and adolescents, tea/coffee intake should be limited to maximum of half cup/day (100 mL) and in 10–18 years one cup/day (200 mL), provided no other caffeinated products (cola and chocolates) are being consumed. Caffeinated energy drinks are as strict *no* for all children and adolescents.