

9 Foods Not to Give Your Kids

By Joe Wilkes

If you've followed the news on childhood obesity lately, you know the state of affairs is pretty grim. Childhood obesity rates have tripled over the past two decades, and most signs point to the next generation being the first whose life expectancy will be shorter than their parents'. Much of the blame for this trend has deservedly been laid at the feet of the producers and marketers of unhealthy food aimed at our youngest consumers, whose parents face an uphill battle: trying to pit fresh, healthy foods devoid of mascots or sidekicks against superheroes and cartoon animals in a struggle to tempt their children's palates and stomachs.



Since most kids have hummingbird metabolisms that adults can only envy, it's often easy to give them a free pass and let them eat whatever they want. But eventually those metabolisms slow down and the pounds settle in. Also, as physical activity decreases and processed food intake increases annually, kids aren't burning calories the way their parents might have when they were their age. And even if the kids aren't getting fat, they are establishing eating habits they'll take into adulthood. As parents, you can help foster a love for healthy eating and exercise that will last your kids a lifetime—hopefully a long one!

Eating can so often be a classic power struggle where kids try to finally locate their mom and dad's last nerve. (I can remember family dinners with my brother and parents that could teach Hezbollah a thing or two about standoffs.) There are a number of strategies you can use to mitigate this type of deadlock. One is to let your kids help with the selection and preparation of the food. If they picked out the veggies at the farmers' market and helped cook them, they might be less inclined to feed them to the family pet. Another is to frame eating vegetables and healthy food as

being its own reward. Otherwise, by offering dessert as a reward for finishing vegetables, you create a system where unhealthy food is a treat and healthy food sucks.

With these thoughts in mind, let's take a look at some of the most unhealthy foods being marketed to your kids today, and some healthier alternatives you can offer to replace each of them.

Note: The following recommendations are for school-aged children. Infants and toddlers have different specific nutritional needs, not addressed in this article.

1. Chicken nuggets/tenders. These popular kids' menu items are little nuggets of compressed fat, sodium, high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS), and in some form, chicken. Depending on the restaurant, chicken might not even be the first ingredient. Oftentimes, the nuggets or tenders are made of ground pieces of chicken meat and skin, pressed into a shape, flavored with HFCS and salt, and batter-fried in hydrogenated oil (the bad, trans-fatty stuff). Then, as if that weren't unhealthy enough, you dunk it in a HFCS- or mayonnaise-based sauce. With all the fat, salt, and sugar, it's easy to understand why they're tasty, but the nutritive value weighed against the huge amount of calories and fat consumed is incredibly lacking. Even healthier-sounding menu items can be deceiving, like McDonald's Premium Breast Strips (5 pieces), which pack 665 calories and 40 grams of fat—and that's before you factor in the dipping sauce. (By comparison, a Big Mac® with sauce has 540 calories and 29 grams of fat.)



Instead: If you're cooking at home, grill a chicken breast and cut it into dipping-size pieces either with a knife or, for extra fun, cookie cutters. Make a healthy dipping sauce from HFCS-free ketchup, marinara sauce, mustard, or yogurt. Let your kids help make the shapes or mix up the sauce. Try and go without breading, but if you must, try dipping the chicken breast in a beaten egg, and then rolling it in cornflake crumbs before you bake it. It'll be crunchy and delicious, but not as fatty.

2. Sugary cereal. I can remember as a child, after going to friends' houses for overnights and being treated to breakfast cereals with marshmallows that turned the milk fluorescent pink or blue, feeling horribly deprived when faced with the less colorful and sugary options served up in my home kitchen. But now I can appreciate my mom and her unpopular brans and granolas. True, they didn't have any cartoon characters on the box or any toy surprises, but they also didn't have the cups of sugar, grams of fat, and hundreds of empty calories that these Saturday morning staples are loaded with.

Instead: Read the labels and try to find cereal that's low in sugar and high in fiber and whole grains. Remember, "wheat" is not the same as "whole wheat." Also, avoid cereals (including some granolas) that have hydrogenated oils, artificial colors, or chemical preservatives. Add raisins, sliced bananas, berries, or other seasonal fruit to the cereal for extra flavor and nutrition. Again, letting your child help design a healthy bowl of cereal from choices you provide will get you a little more buy-in at the breakfast table.

3. Lunch meat and hot dogs. Kids love hot dogs, bologna, and other processed meats, but these are all full of potentially carcinogenic nitrates and nitrites, sodium, saturated fat, and artificial colors and fillers. A study in Los Angeles found that kids who ate 12 hot dogs a month had nine times the risk of developing leukemia.¹ And more health risks are being discovered all the time. Leaf through any research about kids' nutrition, and you're bound to read about the bane of the cafeteria—Oscar Mayer's Lunchables[®]. These and similar prepackaged lunches are loaded with processed meats and crackers made with hydrogenated oils. These innocent-looking meals can boast fat counts of up to 38 grams. That's as much fat as a Burger King[®] Whopper[®] and more than half the recommended daily allowance of fat for an *adult*.



Instead: Get unprocessed meats, like lean turkey breast, chicken, tuna, or roast beef. Use whole wheat bread for sandwiches; or if your kid's dying for Lunchables, fill a small plastic container with whole-grain, low-fat crackers, lean, unprocessed meat, and low-fat cheese. This can be another great time to get out the cookie cutters to make healthy sandwiches more fun. For hot dogs, read

labels carefully. Turkey dogs are usually a good bet, but some are pumped up with a fair amount of chemicals and extra fat to disguise their fowl origins. Look for low levels of fat, low sodium, and a list of ingredients you recognize. There are some tasty veggie dogs on the market, although a good deal of trial and error may be involved for the choosy child.

4. Juice and juice-flavored drinks. Juice—what could be wrong with juice? While 100 percent juice is a good source of vitamin C, it doesn't have the fiber of whole fruit, and provides calories mostly from sugar and carbohydrates. **Too much juice can lead to obesity and tooth decay, among other problems.** The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests 4 to 6 ounces of juice per day for kids under six, and 8 to 12 ounces for older kids. Juice drinks that aren't 100 percent juice are usually laced with artificial colors and that old standby, high fructose corn syrup, and should be avoided. Your best bet is to make your own juice from fresh, seasonal fruit. You won't have to worry about all the additives, and it's another way you can involve your kids in the cooking process. Let them design their own juice "cocktail." And if you were even considering soda, read the Steve Edwards article "[Top 10 Reasons to Give Up Soda](#)" from issue #024.

Instead: Water is still the best thirst quencher. Explain the importance of good hydration to your kids, and try to set a good example yourself by carrying around a healthy reusable hard plastic or stainless steel water bottle. Get your kids used to carrying a small bottle of water in their backpack or attached to their bike. If they're very water averse, try water with a splash of fruit juice in it. But just a splash. The idea is to get your kids used to not having things be overly sweet, overly salty, or overly fatty. Another great beverage is milk. Growing kids need plenty of milk (or fortified nondairy milks, like soy or almond)—which is filled with nutrients, calcium, and (in the case of dairy and soy) protein—but they don't need too much fat, so choosing low-fat or nonfat options will help ensure that they get their milk without actually beginning to resemble a cow.

5. French fries. High in calories, high in fat, and high in sodium—and unsurprisingly the most popular "vegetable" among kids. Fries offer virtually none of the nutrients found in broccoli, carrots, spinach, or other veggies not cooked up in a deep fryer, and the fat they're fried in is often trans fat, the unhealthiest kind for the heart. To top it all off, **studies are beginning to show cancer-causing properties from acrylamide, a toxic substance that is created when starchy foods like potatoes are heated to extreme temperatures.** In some

tests, the amount of acrylamide in French fries was 300 to 600 times higher than the amount the EPA allows in a glass of water.²



Instead: Vegetables like baby carrots, celery sticks, and other crudités are great options, but if potatoes must be had, there are some options that don't involve melting a brick of fat. A scooped-out potato skin with low-fat chili and a little cheese can provide lots of fiber and vitamins, with even higher amounts if the chili has beans. You can also try making baked fries, using slices of potato with a light brushing of olive oil. Or the classic baked potato could be a hit, with plain yogurt or cottage cheese instead of sour cream and butter.

6. Potato chips, Cheetos, Doritos, etc. These are full of fat, oftentimes saturated, and way more sodium than any child or adult should eat. Some chips also have the acrylamide problem discussed in #5, **French fries**, above. Also, watch out for innocent-seeming baked and low-fat chips that contain olestra or other fake fats and chemicals that could present health issues for kids.

Instead: Kids gotta snack, and in fact, since their stomachs are smaller, they aren't usually able to go as long between meals as adults. Cut-up vegetables are the best thing if your kids want to get their crunch on, but air-popped popcorn and some baked chips are okay, too. You can control how much salt goes on the popcorn, or involve your child in experimenting with other toppings like red pepper, Parmesan cheese, or dried herbs. Try making your own trail mix with your kids. They might be more excited to eat their own personal blend, and that way you can avoid certain store-bought trail mixes, which sometimes contain ingredients like chocolate chips and marshmallows that aren't exactly on the healthy snack trail.

7. Fruit leather. Many of these gelatinous snacks like roll-ups or fruit bites contain just a trace amount of fruit, but lots of sugar or HFCS and bright artificial colors. Don't be misled by all the products that include the word

"fruit" on their box. Real fruit is in the produce section, not the candy aisle.

Instead: If your child doesn't show interest in fruit in its natural state, there are some ways you can make it more interesting without losing its nutritional value. For a healthy frozen treat, try filling ice-cube or frozen-pop trays with fruit juice or freezing grapes. Or buy unflavored gelatin and mix it with fruit juice and/or pieces of fruit to make gelatin treats without the added sugar and color (let it solidify in big flat casserole dishes or roasting pans—another good time for the cookie cutters!) Try serving some raisins, dried apricots, apples, peaches, or other dried fruits that might give you that chewy, leathery texture without the sugar.

8. Doughnuts. These little deep-fried gobs of joy are favorites for kids and adults alike, but they are full of fat and trans-fatty acids, and of course, sugar. Toaster pastries, muffins, and cinnamon buns aren't much better. The worst thing about doughnuts and these other pastries, aside from their nutritional content, is that they're often presented to children as acceptable breakfast choices. These delicious deadlies need to be categorized properly—as desserts, to be eaten very sparingly. And you can't have dessert for breakfast.



Instead: Honestly, a slice of whole-wheat toast spread with sugar-free fruit spread or peanut butter isn't going to get as many fans as a chocolate-filled Krispy Kreme, but at some point, you have to stand firm. Be the cop who doesn't like doughnuts. Doughnuts—not for breakfast. Period.

9. Pizza. In moderation, pizza can be a fairly decent choice. If you order the right toppings, you can get in most of your food groups. The problem comes with processed meats like pepperoni and sausage, which add fat and nitrates/nitrites (see #3, **Lunch meat and hot dogs**, above); and the overabundance of cheese, which will also provide more calories and fat than a child needs.

Instead: Try making your own pizza with your kids. Use premade whole wheat crusts, or whole wheat

tortillas, English muffins, or bread as a base. Then brush on HFCS-free sauce, and set up a workstation with healthy ingredients like diced chicken breast, sliced turkey dogs, and vegetables that each child can use to build his or her own pizza. Then sprinkle on a little cheese, bake, and serve. If your child gets used to eating pizza like this, delivery pizzas may seem unbearably greasy after awhile.

Someday your children will come to realize that caped men in tights and sponges who live under the sea might not have their best interests at heart when it comes to food. Until then, however, why not involve them in the process of selecting and preparing healthier alternatives? Some of these cleverly disguised wholesome foods might become their favorites. Who knows, they may even tempt some of the overgrown children among us!

¹ Peters J, et al "Processed meats and risk of childhood leukemia (California, USA)" *Cancer Causes & Control* 5: 195-202, 1994

² Tareke E, Rydberg P, Karlsson P, et al. Analysis of acrylamide, a carcinogen formed in heated foodstuffs, *J. of Agri and Food Chem.* 2002;50:4988-5006