



FACT SHEET

LOW FAT DIETS FOR CHILDREN

- Low Fat diets are unsuitable for young children.
- Fat is essential for energy, growth and development. Essential fatty acids are needed for the nervous system, brain and hormone synthesis. Fat is a source of fat soluble vitamins A,D,E,K and contributes to the taste, texture and palatability of foods. It provides at least 50% of the energy needs of infants in the first 6 months of life.
- Breast milk and infant formula contain about 50% of their energy as fat.
- Diets low in fat are low in energy (kilojoules/calories) and high in complex carbohydrates, sugars and dietary fibre. Diets high in fibre are bulky and filling, hence may reduce total food intake. This is a serious problem for children who tend to be small eaters and commonly fussy. Fibre also decreases digestibility of fat and other energy providing nutrients. Diets low in fat are often a cause of chronic non specific diarrhoea in infants and toddlers.
- Fat is the most concentrated energy source (37kJ/g) compared with protein and carbohydrate (17kJ/g). A low fat diet necessitates the intake of a greater volume of food than a child can normally and comfortably tolerate to meet energy needs.
- Failure to thrive, delayed development and puberty, poor weight and length gain are typically documented outcomes of children following restricted fat diets. Vegetarian children (and vegan) are at particular risk.
- Full fat milks are recommended as the primary milk drink after 1 year of age. Reduced fat milks and other reduced fat dairy products may be introduced after age 2 years while skim milk is not recommended till after age 5. Eggs, cheese, yoghurt, lean meat, fish, chicken, margarine (polyunsaturated/monounsaturated) and butter should be used in moderation to contribute the necessary fat, energy and other nutrients to the diet. Biscuits, chocolates, fried foods and chips which contribute a lot of fat with few nutrients, are best limited.
- Where there is a history of premature heart disease, stroke or high blood fats in a child's family this should be noted and treatment if necessary commenced only under the supervision of a doctor or dietitian.
- Children are not mini adults. The use of low fat diets as a preventative measure against heart disease and obesity needs to be treated with extreme caution.

References

1. National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003. *Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents*.
- 2 Sherriff JL. *Toddlers to Preschool*. Essential Role of Fats throughout the lifecycle. Med J Australia Supplement 2002; 176(6):S113-S114.