USDA Food and Nutrition Administration
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Prioritize Protein Foods

Eating foods from all groups on the Real Food Pyramid gives your child the nutrition he or she needs to grow and be healthy. The food groups are: protein foods, dairy, healthy fats, vegetables, fruits, and whole grains.

At child care, we serve a variety of protein foods to help your child get the nutrients he or she needs for health and growth. Protein supports growing muscles. The iron in protein foods helps the blood to carry oxygen to muscles and other parts of the body. Certain protein foods, such as seafood and nuts, contain healthy fats that support heart health.

Eat a Variety of Protein Foods

Children do not always eat a variety of protein foods. Offering fish or beans at some meals during the week is one way to add more variety to your family's meals.

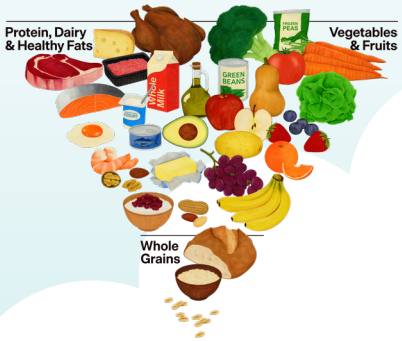
Examples of protein foods to look for when shopping:

Animal sources:

- Beef
- Chicken and turkey
- Eggs
- Pork
- Seafood (fish and shellfish)

Plant sources:

- Beans, peas, lentils, and legumes
- Nuts and seeds
- Nut/seed butters
- Tofu
- Tempeh



Questions About Protein Foods

What if my family doesn't eat certain foods in the protein foods group?

Your child can get enough protein as long as he or she eats a variety of foods from the protein foods group. Protein sources for vegetarians include eggs (for ovo-vegetarians), beans, peas, legumes, lentils, nut/seed butters, and soy products (such as tofu). Dairy, including milk, yogurt, and cheese, is also an excellent source of protein and contains healthy fats, vitamins, and minerals that are important for growth and development. If you have concerns about what your child is eating, talk with your child's doctor. He or she may want to check to see if your child is getting enough iron from protein foods and other sources.

How can I offer healthier choices?

Use these ideas for healthier ways to select and prepare meats, chicken, and turkey:

- Remove the skin from chicken or turkey before or after cooking. Remove any bones to prevent choking.
- Choose meat and poultry options with no or limited added sugars, refined carbohydrates or starches, or chemical additives. You can season them at home with herbs, spices, and salt.
- Try grilling, broiling, roasting, or baking rather than deep frying. Some lean meats need slow, moist cooking to be tender — try a slow cooker.

Are some protein foods higher in sodium (salt)?

The Nutrition Facts label on food packages lists the amount of sodium in a food. Compare the amount of sodium in similar types of foods, and choose ones that are lower in sodium. If using canned beans, look for cans labeled "reduced-sodium" and rinse them with fresh water before using them. Fresh chicken, turkey, seafood, pork, and other meats are usually lower in sodium than processed meat and poultry. Examples of processed meats and poultry are sausages, bologna, frankfurters (hot dogs), luncheon meats and loaves, pepperoni, and pre-marinated chicken. Choosing foods that are lower in sodium can help you lower your family's risk of high blood pressure and related diseases.

To learn more about healthy eating, please visit **RealFood.gov.**

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