

# **Healthy Food and Drink Guidance – Early Learning Services**

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# Healthy eating is important

Good nutrition is essential for the healthy growth and development of children. Children may eat much of their food each weekday in early learning services. When children eat a nutritious diet, they find it easier to learn. Teachers report improvements in children's attendance, attention, behaviour and levels of concentration in early learning services where healthy eating is accepted practice.

# Purpose

For the purposes of this *Healthy Food and Drink Guidance – Early Learning Services* (Guidance), 'early learning services' are defined as licensed early childhood education services, ngā kōhanga reo and certificated playgroups.

This Guidance helps licensed early learning services to develop a policy to promote and provide healthy foods and drinks. Establishing and following this policy shows your commitment to improving the wellbeing of children, staff and the community.

The Guidance supports early learning services to invest in wellbeing. It is about creating supportive environments for children where healthy choices are easy.

This Guidance enables children to:

- access healthy foods and drinks in early learning services
- develop healthy food and drink preferences
- learn to make positive choices about foods and drinks.

# Scope

The Guidance applies to:

- all foods and drinks provided by or served in an early learning service
- food for special occasions or celebrations
- free or charitable food provided to early learning services
- gifts of food or drink to children.

The Guidance excludes:

- foods and drinks that children or staff bring to an early learning service for themselves.

Early learning services that do not provide foods and drinks should encourage parents and carers to provide a lunchbox consistent with the Guidance.

The Guidance recognises the benefits of breastfeeding. Early learning services are encouraged to support mothers to continue breastfeeding by providing a suitable place where they can breastfeed their babies or store expressed breast milk.

The ages in the Guidance are based on the normal range of development in small children. If a child has a suspected or diagnosed developmental delay, discuss food requirements with the child's parents or caregivers.

# Principles

The principles of this Guidance are as follows.

1. Offer a variety of healthy foods from the four food groups:
  - plenty of vegetables and fruit
  - grain foods (for children over two years, mostly wholegrain and naturally high in fibre)
  - milk and milk products
  - legumes, fish and other seafood, eggs, poultry (eg, chicken) and/or red meat with fat removed.
2. Food should be prepared with or contain minimal saturated fat, salt (sodium) and added sugar; and should be mostly whole or less processed and appropriate for the child's age and stage.

This means:

- foods containing moderate amounts of saturated fat, salt and/or added sugar may be available in small portions (eg, some baked goods)
- no deep-fried foods
- no confectionery (eg, sweets and chocolate).

3. Offer only water and unflavoured milk as drink options.

Offer only breast milk (or a commercial infant formula if required) for children aged 0–6 months.

Breast milk (or a commercial infant formula if required) should be the main drink for children aged 6–12 months.

This means:

- no sugar-sweetened drinks
- no drinks containing 'intense' (artificial) sweeteners
- no fruit or vegetable juices (including 100 percent juice, no-added-sugar varieties).

# Food-related choking in young children

Children under the age of five years, and particularly those younger than three years, are at a higher risk of choking on food. This is because they have small air and food passages and are still learning to move food around in their mouths. Their biting, chewing and food-grinding skills are in some cases still developing. Early learning services must consider the nutritional requirements of children when deciding how they will serve foods that have a high choking risk for children.

To provide a safe physical environment for eating:

- supervise babies and children when they are eating
- have an appropriate ratio of adults to children at mealtimes
- minimise distractions and encourage children to focus on eating
- set a specific eating time when children sit to eat
- have children sit in the developmentally appropriate seating and position for eating – that is, upright on a chair that is appropriate to their size and has a firm back
- ask children not to talk with their mouths full
- place food on the table directly in front of the child. In this way, the child is less likely to twist to the left or right, which can cause them to lose control of the food in their mouth.

For further guidance on food-related choking, see the **toolkit**.

# Developing a policy for early learning services

This Guidance is to help early learning services, families and whānau to create a healthier food environment. In developing or reviewing a food and drink policy, you can arrive at a shared philosophy about all aspects of food and drinks served in your service.

As part of your review of policies and practices, you should take into account any regulations that govern food and nutrition and food hygiene.

When developing a policy for your early learning service, you should consider:

- the needs of different cultures and religious groups and people with special dietary needs, including those with allergies and intolerances (eg, gluten-free), vegetarians and vegans
- where your service provides meals, making available healthy food and drink choices that are appropriate for a wide range of children
- discouraging products that are inconsistent with this Guidance
- the choking risk of certain foods for young children
- designating a suitable space for breastfeeding and storing breast milk
- encouraging sustainable, seasonal and locally grown foods and drinks, where possible.

# Classifying foods and drinks

The Guidance identifies the healthy options for the food and drinks an early learning service provides. It classifies foods and drinks with colour codes – green, amber and red – as detailed in the table below. These classifications are for use in this Guidance only. They provide a practical way to categorise foods as healthy or less healthy.

Please note: some recommendations vary between different age groups.

Green items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• are a good source of nutrition</li><li>• are the basis of a healthy diet</li><li>• are generally lower in saturated fat, salt and added sugar<sup>1</sup></li><li>• are mostly whole and less processed</li><li>• come from the four food groups: vegetables and fruit; grain foods (mostly wholegrain and those naturally high in fibre for children over two years); milk and milk products (mostly low fat for children over two years); and legumes, seafood, eggs and meat with fat removed.</li></ul>
Amber items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• are not part of an everyday diet</li><li>• may have some nutritional value</li><li>• are often more processed</li><li>• in large serving sizes, can contribute to consuming excess kilojoules/calories.</li></ul>
Red items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• have poor nutritional value</li><li>• are high in saturated fat, salt and/or added sugar</li><li>• can contribute to consuming excess kilojoules/calories</li><li>• are often highly processed.</li></ul>

Healthy foods and drinks should be the easy choice. Healthy options should make up at least 75 percent of foods and drinks served.

<sup>1</sup> For children under two years: prepare food with no added salt or sugar. If using commercially prepared foods, use those that are low in salt (sodium) and with no added sugar.

Early learning services should manage the availability of foods and drinks classified as green, amber and red as follows.

Green items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• are the main kind of foods and drinks available</li><li>• are always available in sufficient quantities to be the main option.</li></ul>
Amber items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• are 'selected carefully' by early learning services, and do not dominate menus</li><li>• may be available in limited amounts and portion sizes (according to the nutrient criteria tables – see the next section)</li><li>• are not served at the expense of foods classified as green.</li></ul>
Red items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• are not provided or are phased out over time in line with each early learning service's implementation plan.</li></ul>

Please note: For children aged 0–2 years, early learning services should only offer foods and drinks classified as 'green'.

## Health Star Rating

The Health Star Rating system<sup>2</sup> is a front-of-pack labelling system that rates the nutritional profile of packaged foods. It helps you to compare the nutritional value of products that you typically see shelved side by side in a grocery shop. The system assigns a rating from half a star to five stars. The more stars a product has, the healthier it is. The star rating allows you to compare products within a similar category only. For example, the system might help you choose between one breakfast cereal and another, but not between yoghurt and pasta sauce.

This Guidance uses a minimum Health Star Rating (HSR) of 3.5 as an indication that a packaged item is 'healthy'. If an HSR for a particular food or drink is unavailable, you can assess how healthy it is by referring to this Guidance for the nutrient cut-offs and description of the category it fits in.

Please refer to *useful definitions* (page 18).

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see:  
[www.healthstarrating.gov.au/internet/healthstarrating/publishing.nsf/Content/How-to-use-health-stars](http://www.healthstarrating.gov.au/internet/healthstarrating/publishing.nsf/Content/How-to-use-health-stars)

# Nutrient criteria tables

The nutrient criteria tables help you to classify foods and drinks as green, amber or red.

## Vegetables and fruit

Vegetables	
Green	Fresh, frozen, canned (and drained) and dried vegetables, including potatoes, kūmara, taro, cassava and kamokamo
Amber	Vegetable products (eg, creamed corn) with an HSR of $\geq 3.5$
Red	Vegetable products with an HSR of $< 3.5$

  

Fruit	
Green	Fresh and frozen fruit, and canned fruit in natural juice, drained
Amber	Fruit products with an HSR of $\geq 3.5$
Red	Fruit products with an HSR of $< 3.5$ Choking hazard: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>dried fruit on its own or as an ingredient or part of a fruit and nut mix</li></ul>

## Grains, cereals and breads

Breads and crackers	
Green	<p><b>Children around 6 months to 2 years</b></p> <p>Plain and wheatmeal bread and wraps, and pita bread</p> <p><b>Children 2+ years</b></p> <p>All wholegrain, multigrain, wheatmeal and wholemeal bread with <math>\geq 5</math> g fibre per 100 g and <math>&lt; 450</math> mg sodium per 100 g</p> <p>Higher-fibre, lower-sodium varieties of wraps and pita bread</p> <p>All wholegrain, multigrain, wheatmeal and wholemeal crispbreads and easy-to-chew crackers with an HSR of <math>\geq 3.5</math></p>
Amber	<p><b>Children 2+ years</b></p> <p>Other bread products with <math>&lt; 5</math> g fibre and/or <math>\geq 450</math> mg sodium per 100 g</p> <p>All other easy-to-chew crispbreads and crackers with an HSR of <math>\geq 3.5</math> HSR</p>
Red	<p>All other crispbreads and crackers with an HSR of <math>&lt; 3.5</math></p> <p>Choking hazards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• popcorn</li> <li>• hard-to-chew crackers</li> <li>• bread with large seeds such as pumpkin or sunflower seeds</li> </ul>

Breakfast cereals	
Green	<p><b>Children around 6 to 12 months</b></p> <p>Iron-fortified baby cereal</p> <p>Iron-fortified baby rice</p> <p><b>Children 1 to 2 years</b></p> <p>Breakfast cereal and porridge with an HSR of <math>\geq 3.5</math> and <math>\leq 15</math> g sugar per 100 g</p> <p><b>Children 2+ years</b></p> <p>Wholegrain breakfast cereal and porridge with an HSR of <math>\geq 3.5</math> and <math>\leq 15</math> g sugar per 100 g</p>
Amber	<p><b>Children 2+ years</b></p> <p>Other breakfast cereal with an HSR of <math>\geq 3.5</math></p>
Red	<p>Breakfast cereals that do not meet the green or amber criteria</p>

Other grains	
Green	<p><b>Children around 6 months to 2 years</b></p> <p>White rice, plain pasta, unflavoured noodles and couscous</p> <p><b>Children 2+ years</b></p> <p>Wholegrain and brown rice, wholemeal pasta and noodles, quinoa, oats, buckwheat, rye</p>
Amber	<p><b>Children 2+ years</b></p> <p>Refined grains and white rice, plain pasta and unflavoured noodles and couscous</p>
Red	<p>Flavoured packets of grains, rice, pasta and noodles</p>

## Milk and milk products

Milk	
Green	<p><b>Children 0 to 6 months</b> Breast milk (or a commercial infant formula if required)</p> <p><b>Children around 6 to 12 months</b> Breast milk (or a commercial infant formula if required)</p> <p><b>Children 1 to 2 years</b> Breast milk Unsweetened full-fat milk (or unsweetened soy milk with added calcium and vitamin B12)</p> <p><b>Children 2+ years</b> Unsweetened low-fat milk and plant-based milks (eg, soy, rice, almond, oat) with added calcium and vitamin B12</p>
Amber	<p><b>Children 2+ years</b> Unsweetened full-fat milk and plant-based milks (eg, soy, rice, almond, oat) with added calcium and vitamin B12</p>
Red	All sweetened milk drinks

Milk products	
Green	<p><b>Children around 6 months to 2 years</b> Plain unsweetened full-fat yoghurt Cheese (<math>\leq 20</math> g portion)</p> <p><b>Children 2+ years</b> Reduced- or low-fat milk products with an HSR of <math>\geq 3.5</math>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• yoghurt and dairy food (<math>\leq 80</math> g portion)</li> <li>• custard (<math>\leq 80</math> g portion)</li> <li>• cheese (<math>\leq 20</math> g portion)</li> </ul>
Amber	<p><b>Children 2+ years</b> Full-fat milk products with an HSR of <math>\geq 3.5</math>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• yoghurt and dairy food (<math>\leq 80</math> g portion)</li> <li>• custard (<math>\leq 80</math> g portion)</li> <li>• cheese (<math>\leq 20</math> g portion)</li> </ul> <p>Reduced- or low-fat cream, sour cream and cream cheese Lite<sup>3</sup> coconut milk or coconut cream, or coconut cream diluted with water</p>
Red	<p>Full-fat milk products with an HSR of <math>&lt; 3.5</math>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• full-fat yoghurt and dairy food (<math>&gt; 80</math> g portion)</li> <li>• custard (<math>&gt; 80</math> g portion)</li> <li>• cheese (<math>&gt; 20</math> g portion)</li> <li>• full-fat cream, sour cream and cream cheese</li> <li>• frozen desserts, eg, ice cream</li> <li>• full-fat coconut milk and coconut cream</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> 'Lite' refers to a version of the standard variety that is reduced in fat, salt, energy and/or sugar.

## Legumes, nuts, seeds, fish and other seafood, eggs, poultry (eg, chicken) and red meat

Legumes	
Green	Fresh, dried or canned legumes (drained and rinsed) – eg, beans, peas, red kidney beans, lentils, chickpeas, split peas, tofu and baked beans
Amber	
Red	

Nuts <sup>4</sup> and seeds	
Green	
Amber	
Red	<p>Choking hazards – all large or whole nuts and seeds, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• plain, raw unsalted nuts</li> <li>• salted nuts and seeds</li> <li>• sugared or candy-coated nuts and seeds</li> <li>• nuts and seeds with confectionery<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>

Fish and other seafood	
Green	<p>Fresh fish or seafood</p> <p>Frozen and canned fish or seafood with an HSR of <math>\geq 3.5</math></p>
Amber	<p>Fish or seafood<sup>6</sup> with an HSR of <math>&lt; 3.5</math>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <math>\leq 30</math> g in sandwiches, rolls, wraps or salads</li> <li>• <math>\leq 60</math> g as a meal</li> </ul>
Red	Fish or seafood that does not meet the amber criteria

<sup>4</sup> Exposure to peanuts can have severe consequences for children who are allergic to those products. Your early learning service should consider limiting exposure to these items if you have children with allergies.

<sup>5</sup> 'Confectionery' includes boiled sweets, toffees and caramels, fudge, fondants, gums (including sugar-free gums), pastilles and jellies, chocolate, fruit leathers, yoghurt-covered items, candied fruit and nuts, and compound chocolate.

<sup>6</sup> Processed meats, including processed poultry and fish, are not recommended for children under two years. Examples of processed meats include: fresh sausages, smoked chicken, smoked fish, luncheon, bologna, cooked sausages, salami, pepperoni, ham, corned beef, pastrami, cured meat products (eg, roast beef), bacon, dry-cured meat products (eg, prosciutto) and meat patties.

<b>Poultry (chicken and turkey)</b>	
Green	Fresh or frozen poultry with fat removed Poultry <sup>7</sup> with an HSR of $\geq 3.5$
Amber	Processed poultry <sup>7</sup> (eg, deli or smoked meat, luncheon, loaf) with an HSR of $<3.5$ : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <math>\leq 30</math> g in sandwiches, rolls, wraps or salads</li> <li>• <math>\leq 60</math> g as a meal</li> </ul>
Red	Processed poultry that does not meet the amber criteria Choking hazard: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sausages served either as part of a meal or as an individual item</li> </ul>

<b>Red meat</b>	
Green	Meat with fat removed Cooked mince with fat drained <b>Children 2+ years</b> Processed <sup>7</sup> meat with an HSR of $\geq 3.5$
Amber	<b>Children 2+ years</b> Processed <sup>7</sup> meat with an HSR of $<3.5$ : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <math>\leq 30</math> g in sandwiches, rolls, wraps or salads</li> <li>• <math>\leq 60</math> g as a meal</li> </ul>
Red	Meat where fat is visible Cooked mince without the fat drained Processed meat that does not meet the amber criteria Choking hazards: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sausages served either as part of a meal or as an individual item</li> <li>• dried meat products</li> </ul>

<b>Eggs</b>	
Green	Eggs
Amber	
Red	

<sup>7</sup> Processed meats, including processed poultry and fish, are not recommended for children under two years. Examples of processed meats include: fresh sausages, smoked chicken, smoked fish, luncheon, bologna, cooked sausages, salami, pepperoni, ham, corned beef, pastrami, cured meat products (eg, roast beef), bacon, dry-cured meat products (eg, prosciutto) and meat patties.

## Mixed meals and ready-to-eat meals

Note: Food for children under two years of age should be prepared with no added salt (sodium) or sugar. If using commercially prepared foods, choose those that are low in salt and with no added sugar.

<b>Mixed meals and ready-to-eat meals</b> (two or more items or ingredients from different food groups, eg, pizza, lasagne, macaroni cheese, soup)	
Green	Meals that contain vegetables and/or fruit and at least 75 percent green ingredients <sup>8</sup> and no more than 25 percent of amber ingredients, as assessed by a visual check or referring to the ingredient list
Amber	Meals that contain vegetables and/or fruit and are prepared with green and amber ingredients only
Red	Meals that contain no vegetables, fruit or green items or ingredients

<b>Sandwiches and wraps</b>	
Green	Sandwiches and wraps prepared with vegetables and green ingredients only, including the bread
Amber	Sandwiches and wraps prepared with vegetables and green and amber ingredients only, including the bread
Red	Sandwiches and wraps that do not meet the amber criteria

<b>Sushi</b>	
Green	Sushi prepared with mostly green ingredients (eg, sushi made with either white or brown rice)
Amber	Other sushi, except for sushi containing deep-fried ingredients
Red	Sushi containing deep-fried ingredients

<sup>8</sup> Foods not classified as amber or red (eg, cornflour or baking powder) can also be included.

## Fats and oils, spreads, sauces, dressings and condiments, deep-fried foods

Fats, oils and spreads	
Green	No-added-salt spreads, eg, nut butter Vegetable oils and spreads, eg, canola, olive, rice bran, sunflower, soya bean, flaxseed, peanut or sesame
Amber	Standard spreads A single serve of butter ( $\leq 10$ g)
Red	Saturated fats and oils, eg, lard, palm oil and coconut oil A single serve of butter ( $> 10$ g)
Sauces and dressings	
Green	Salad dressings, mayonnaise and tomato sauce with reduced fat, salt and sugar Use in small amounts or serve on the side
Amber	Standard salad dressings, mayonnaise and tomato sauce Use in small amounts or serve on the side
Red	
Sweet condiments	
Green	Reduced-sugar jam or commercially made compote
Amber	Standard jam or commercially made compote ( $< 1$ tablespoon portion)
Red	
Deep-fried foods	
Green	
Amber	
Red	All deep-fried foods

## Packaged snack foods and confectionery

Packaged snack foods <sup>9</sup>	
Green	
Amber	Packaged snack foods with an HSR of $\geq 3.5$ and $\leq 600$ kJ per packet
Red	Packaged snack foods with an HSR of $< 3.5$ HSR or $> 600$ kJ per packet Choking hazard: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>popcorn</li> </ul>

Confectionery	
Green	
Amber	
Red	All confectionery

## Baked items

Baked items	
Green	
Amber	<p>Packaged or unpackaged baked items must contain some wholemeal flour, wholegrains (eg, oats, bran) and/or fruit or vegetables (eg, fresh, frozen, canned or dried)</p> <p>Products that contain no confectionery</p> <p>Products that have no icing</p> <p>Muesli bars (easy to chew) with an HSR of <math>\geq 3.5</math></p> <p>Portion sizes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>scones, cake and dessert <math>\leq 50</math> g portion</li> <li>loaf and muffins <math>\leq 50</math> g portion</li> <li>slices <math>\leq 40</math> g portion</li> <li>biscuits and pikelets <math>\leq 20</math> g portion</li> <li>small pastries <math>\leq 40</math> g portion</li> <li>pies and quiches <math>\leq 80</math> g portion</li> </ul>
Red	<p>Products that do not meet the amber criteria</p> <p>Sweet bakery items that contain confectionery</p> <p>Sweet bakery items with icing</p> <p>Choking hazards and low nutrition:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>sausage rolls</li> <li>energy bars, protein bars and other muesli bars with an HSR of <math>&lt; 3.5</math> and/or whole nuts and/or dried fruit</li> </ul>

<sup>9</sup> 'Packaged snack foods' refers to packaged foods not covered by other categories (eg, baked items).

## Drinks

Drinks	
Green	<p><b>Children 0 to around 6 months</b> Breast milk (or a commercial infant formula if required)</p> <p><b>Children around 6 months to 1 year</b> Breast milk (or a commercial infant formula if required) and water</p> <p><b>Children 1 to 2 years</b> Plain full-fat milk (or if necessary, unsweetened soy milk with added calcium and vitamin B12) or breast milk Plain, unflavoured water</p> <p><b>Children 2+ years</b> Plain, unflavoured water Reduced- or low-fat milk Unsweetened reduced-fat or low-fat plant-based milks (eg, soy, almond, oat, rice) with added calcium and vitamin B12</p>
Amber	<p><b>Children 2+ years</b> Plain, full-fat milk and plant-based milks (eg, soy, almond, oat, rice) with added calcium and vitamin B12</p>
Red	<p>Sugar-sweetened drinks<sup>10</sup> Artificially sweetened drinks Milk-based drinks with added sugar (eg, milkshakes) 100 percent fruit and/or vegetable juices, including those diluted with no added sugar, and unflavoured coconut water Energy drinks and sports drinks Flavoured waters</p>
Smoothies (all varieties, including dairy and non-dairy)	
Green	
Amber	
Red	All smoothies

<sup>10</sup> 'Sugar-sweetened drinks' refers to any drink that contains added caloric sweetener, usually sugar. They include soft drinks/fizzy drinks, sachet mixes, fruit drinks, cordials, flavoured milk, flavoured water, cold tea and coffee, and energy and sports drinks.

# Useful definitions

You can use the definitions below to help you interpret this Guidance.

## Processed foods

Any food that has been milled, cut, heated, cooked, canned, frozen, cured, dehydrated, mixed or packaged or that has undergone any other process that alters the food from its natural state. Processing may also involve adding other ingredients to the food.

## Whole foods

Foods that are close to their natural state but may have been harvested, washed or cleaned ready for eating or cooking. Examples of whole foods are fresh vegetables and fruit, raw legumes, raw nuts and seeds, eggs, fish, chicken and red meat (with visible fat removed).

## Less processed foods

Foods that have undergone some processing, but have kept most of their physical, chemical, sensory and nutritional properties. They are usually processed with the aim of making the food:

- safer – for example, pasteurised milk products
- healthier – for example, low-fat milk, which contains less energy (kilojoules) and less saturated fat than full-fat milk
- more convenient to use – for example:
  - wholegrains that have had their outer, inedible husks removed but still have the edible parts of their structure
  - wholemeal flour
  - frozen, packaged vegetables and fruit that have been frozen quickly to keep their nutrient content
  - canned legumes, vegetables and fruit with no or minimal added sugar and/or salt.

## Highly processed foods

These foods, or the ingredients used to make them, are heavily processed so they are usually very different from their natural states. Highly processed, ready-to-eat foods tend to be low in naturally occurring nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, fibre and other phytonutrients. They are often high in refined grains, energy (kilojoules), and added saturated fat, sugar and/or salt (sodium).

## Refined grains

Refined grains have had most or all of the bran and germ removed, leaving only the endosperm. They provide more kilojoules but fewer nutrients and much less fibre than wholegrains. Some examples include white rice, white bread and white pasta.

# Source material

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