



Cooperative Extension

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When it's time for babies to feed themselves, many parents struggle with finding the "perfect foods"—foods that are nutritious, tasty, and age appropriate. They may wonder which ones to avoid, as well. Exposing your little ones to healthful, nutritious foods at a young age is the best way to encourage them to eat healthier throughout life.

By age one, babies usually are ready to feed themselves. Curved "toddler spoons" are great teaching tools, especially for foods like yogurt. Although children should get plenty of practice using utensils, it is important for them to experiment with finger foods as well. Finger foods are a great way for little ones to show their independence by feeding themselves. (They are also easy to prepare.)

As babies make the transition to table food, they will want to learn as much as possible about tastes and textures. Experts advise letting children play and experiment as they learn how to handle new foods. The more familiar they are with a food, the more likely they will be to try it. They may even be less finicky.

Parents can expect plenty of messes and a few spills during this transition time. But, they should be patient and let children use their hands, despite the mashed food that may end up on the walls, the floor, or in the carpet. (Hint: Make cleanup easier. Place a plastic trash bag, newspaper, or table cloth under the highchair and use larger bibs that cover more of a child's clothes.)

The best advice for parents is to relax and enjoy—this is a learning time for both babies and adults. Little ones will have fun using their fingers and making a mess, and adults may find themselves having fun watching!

When selecting foods for children, adults should remember that safety is very important. Children under age four are at risk for choking because their throats are small and they may not chew food well. Having teeth does not mean that a child can handle all foods.

These foods present a choking hazard: hot dogs, whole bananas, raw vegetables, whole grapes, popcorn, chips, nuts, seeds, raisins, dates, string cheese, round cereals, marshmallows, round candies, and peanut butter—especially if it is spread on thickly or eaten from a spoon.

Use these tips to reduce choking risk:

- Cut hot dogs, grapes, and whole bananas lengthwise into four pieces.
- Pull string cheese into narrow strands of cheese and cut into short pieces.
- Spread peanut butter thinly and avoid serving on a spoon.
- Cut children's food into small pieces.
- Make children sit when eating.

Healthy eating habits should start early in life, so parents have an important job ahead of them. Finding a variety of nutritious finger foods for little ones can be a challenge—but it is not impossible. Turn the page for some ideas!

So...Just What *is* a Finger Food?

Fact Sheet FS1046



Grain, Breads, Cereals, and Pasta

*Tip: Make half of the grains you serve **whole** grains. A food is a good source of **whole** grains, if they are listed first on the ingredient list.*

Dry cereal (such as Cheerios® or Kix®)	Tortillas (look for whole wheat tortillas)
Cereal bars (like Nutrigrain®)	Mini rice cakes
Crackers	Cooked rice
Pancakes or waffles	Pita bread (add hummus for a tasty treat)
Soft granola bars	Pasta (such as whole wheat spaghetti or pastina)
Tortellini or mini ravioli	
Elbow macaroni, "bow tie" or pastina	

Fruits

Tip: Follow the safety ideas from this fact sheet to prevent choking. Serve ripe, soft, peeled, fruit and always slice before serving.

Banana slices	Watermelon chunks
Mealy apple	Peaches
Canned fruit chunks	Pears
Grapes (sliced in half to prevent choking)	Plums
Cantaloupe chunks	Guava
Honeydew chunks	Mango

Vegetables

Tip: Serve well-cooked vegetables to prevent choking. Fresh, frozen, and canned are all fine.

Green beans	Beets
Broccoli	Corn
Asparagus	Peas
Sweet potatoes or yams (mash or cut into pieces)	Soft, ripe avocado
Carrots	Mashed potatoes

Milk, Cheese and Yogurt

Cottage cheese	Hard cheese, such as cheddar or Gouda (shredded, sliced, or cut into pieces)
Yogurt (made from whole milk for kids under age 2)	
Cheese sticks, such as mozzarella (cut into strips and pieces)	

Meat, Poultry, Fish, Beans, and Eggs

Small pieces of tender meat, chicken, or fish	Cooked dried beans
Fish sticks	Baked beans
Scallops	Scrambled and hard-cooked eggs

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