**Introduction**

Snacking is one of the important sources of nutrition for toddler’s diet. In addition to eating and curbing hunger, meal and snack timings of toddlers are a way to interact with others and learn new skills and values. Midmorning and evening snacks are essential ways to support the main meals to fill the nutritional gap of toddlers between meals.

Snacking is one of the important sources of nutrition for toddler’s diet and a way to fill the nutritional gap between meals. Toddlers tend to imitate elders and are influenced by the social environment. This imitation extends even when it comes to snacking. Toddlerhood is a stage where healthy eating habits can be integrated. A healthy snack for a toddler should be nutritionally balanced and should be able to support the main meals to meet the increasing nutrient requirements of a growing toddler without affecting the proper meals.

**Developmental milestones in toddlers and readiness for snacking**

Rapid physical growth takes place in the first year of life. Babies triple their body weight by the end of first year and double their birth height by the end of first year. However, the rate of physical growth slows down in the second year during which babies quadruple their birth weight by the end of 2nd year and almost triple their birth height.\(^1\)\(^2\) Though the physical growth is steadier after 1 year of age, social, cognitive, emotional and gross motor skill development progresses swiftly during the toddlerhood.\(^3\)

The years from 2 to 6 years of age are also called “the play years”.\(^3\) The toddlers develop in different aspects and therefore their energy and nutritional needs are high. Healthy snacking is one of the ways to meet the nutritional needs of toddlerhood along with main meals. Major mental, skeletal and gross motor development during toddlerhood are as follows:

- **Mental development**
  - Synaptic growth and myelination of neural fibers results in a high energy needs and energy metabolism is at its peak.\(^1\)
  - The brain weight increases from 70% of its adult weight to 90% from age 2 to 6 years.\(^3\)

- **Skeletal development**
  - In various parts of the skeleton of the preschooler, 45 new epiphyses emerge in which the cartilage is replaced by bone tissue (ossification process).\(^2\)

- **Motor development**
  - Jumping, running, hopping, skipping, throwing and catching ball etc. become part of their activities.\(^1\)

An infant’s developmental milestones with respect to his or her feeding skills determines their readiness to eat and the consistency of food that they can be offered as snacks. Introducing appropriate foods for each feeding milestones are important in determining the food habits and preferences of the toddler later in life.\(^3\)
As toddlers try to become independent with their food choices and start self-feeding, snacks along with meals are important to meet their nutritional requirements. Snacks can contribute to 25% of their total energy intake. A healthy snack should offer two of the four food groups and a balanced meal should offer three of the four food groups. Nutritionally balanced snacks can meet the increased requirements of essential fatty acids, iron and calcium for the growing toddler along with the main meals. In the United States, snacking trend in children between 2 and 18 years of age has increased from 74% in 1977–1978 to 98% in the year 2003–2006. Snack consumption was reported to be highest in children aged between 2 and 6 years from 1977 to 2006 in addition to increased consumption of calories (i.e. 182 calories more per day). This may also suggest that high calorie nutritionally poor foods may have become part of the toddler’s diet over these years. Increased availability of snacks outside homes and increased consumption of sweetened beverages, salty snacks and candies become an important part of snacking habits of children.

**Importance of snacking**

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**Issues with eating pattern of toddlers**

Preschoolers need nutrient dense foods to manage with the current growth and development. Fussy eating and unpredictable appetite are some of the challenges faced by preschoolers. Unpredictable appetite is when a toddler may willingly eat one meal and may not even touch the food at other meal timing. One of the other reasons for the decline in their appetite may be a slower growth rate after the first year. Toddlers also show “food neophobia” i.e. reluctance to try new food. They may also exhibit “food jag” i.e. repeatedly requesting for one food while the other foods are totally avoided. These eating patterns increase their risk of nutritional deficiencies.

Toddlerhood is also a stage where good eating habits can be integrated. Preschoolers tend to imitate elders and are influenced by the social environment around. Therefore it is important for parents to be better role models in terms of eating nutritionally rich food. Another challenge is the consumption of unhealthy snacks. Unhealthy snacking can be associated with increased incidences of childhood obesity. Wrong choices of snacks have been shown to increase overall caloric intake resulting in childhood obesity.

**Encouraging healthy snacking in toddlers**

As per National Institute of Nutrition India, children below the age of 5 years of age should be given energy-rich and protein-rich, less bulky foods as snacks. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics recommends the following steps to encourage healthy snacking habits in toddlers as below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Make a snack schedule</th>
<th>Offer a new food repeatedly</th>
<th>Snacks on the go</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unscheduled snacking or munching at odd times can lead to overeating unhealthy practices and push meal timings.</td>
<td>Offering a new food 5–10 times increases the chance of acceptance by the toddler.</td>
<td>Carrying a small and nutritious snack such as a fruit when travelling out of the house will curd unhealthy snacking habits.</td>
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A few pointers by the American Heart Association for improving nutrition in young children are:

- Parents should decide meal timings and not children
- Parents/caretakers should offer fruits and vegetables instead of energy-dense nutritionally poor foods
- Portion size should be controlled
- Snacking in response to boredom should be discouraged
- Unhealthy snacking options such as juices, soda, and sports drink should be restricted
- Regular family meal timings will help children develop healthy eating habits

**Conclusion**

Nutritionally rich snacks with schedule timings can initiate healthy eating habits in toddler’s right from the starting. It can also help their erratic eating patterns and ensure prevention of nutritional deficiencies.

**References**