



Bord Iascaigh Mhara
Irish Sea Fisheries Board

Fish for tots to teens



Getting started on healthy eating

As adults, most of us know about the health benefits of eating fish. We know that it is a low fat food that's useful if we're trying to lose weight and that it is rich in omega 3 fats, which help to protect against heart disease. When it comes to children, however, we don't often think of fish as an important, healthy food that has special benefits for this age group.

As children begin to move away from pureed and soft foods towards more adult foods, it is an important time to get your child used to lots of different foods. What children eat at a young age sets the stage for good eating habits right into old age. Children need to try lots of new and different foods – even foods you don't like – so that they have a better chance of choosing a healthier diet when they grow up.

Fish to grow

Fish has many benefits to offer children. It is a rich source of protein which is essential for all those rapidly growing bones and muscles. Fish is very easy to digest and is gentle on little stomachs. All kinds of fish are rich in minerals like zinc, selenium and iodine that healthy bones, muscles and immune systems need.

The omega 3 fats found in oil-rich fish such as trout and mackerel are essential for brain development. Over 60% of the brain is made up of fat and omega 3 fats make up about half of this. It is important for young children to eat plenty of omega 3 fats as our bodies cannot make them and they are only found in a few foods. Fish is one of the richest sources of omega 3 fats and health experts recommend that we eat fish twice a week as part of a healthy diet – for adults and for young children.

ADHD and Dyslexia

ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and dyslexia in children have been linked in some studies with a lack of omega 3 fats. Some children with ADHD have been found to have low levels of omega 3 fats in their blood and some studies of dyslexia have found improvements in children who have been given supplements of omega 3 fats. So should we be treating all children with ADHD and dyslexia with omega 3 fats? There is not enough research to make recommendations yet, but as omega 3 fats are an important part of brain development, it is a good idea to encourage your child to eat oil-rich fish.

Preventing Asthma

Apart from the health benefits fish has for older adults, eating fish may also help to protect children from developing asthma. Several studies have found that children who regularly eat fish, especially oil-rich fish, have a significantly lower risk of developing asthma. As asthma is a growing concern for many parents, encouraging children to get into the habit of eating oil-rich fish becomes even more important.



But my child won't eat fish!

Many children will refuse foods at some stage – more often around the age of 2-3 but it can last much longer. Children who were not offered much fish when they were starting to eat solid food may not be used to the taste or texture. Another problem is that parents often avoid giving children food they don't like themselves – so if you don't like fish, your children may never get to try it!

Helping your child to eat fish:

- Do offer fish at least once a week. It can take time for children (and adults) to get used to the new taste and texture of fish. As they get more familiar with how fish feels in their mouth, they will start to be more comfortable eating it. Do be patient. Start with very small amounts of fish, even a mouthful with a meal, and gradually work up. It generally takes about 6 weeks of trying a new food to become comfortable with it, so take your time
- Do start with white fish like whiting and haddock which have a milder flavour. As your child gets used to the fish you can add in new varieties and start introducing the stronger tasting oil-rich fish
- Don't force children to eat fish – this usually puts them off. Do encourage them to try even one small taste each time you serve fish and let them eat more if they want to
- Do eat fish yourself. Most children will copy what they see their parents doing – if they see you eating and enjoying fish, they are more likely to try it themselves
- Do offer fish to children as early as possible. Fish is an ideal food for weaning – but take care to remove all the bones, especially the small, fine bones
- Do get older children involved in cooking and preparing meals with fish – many children are willing to eat anything they have cooked themselves
- Try lots of different kinds of fish and different ways of cooking them.

Watch out for...

Shark, marlin and swordfish are not suitable fish for children and should be avoided. Tinned tuna should only be eaten twice a week and fresh tuna only once a week. These fish all contain mercury which can be harmful to the nervous system of young children if eaten in large amounts.

Keep an eye out for bones...

Young children are not always able to pick out the smaller bones in fish so make sure you check any fish for bones before serving it. Try fish like salmon that has larger bones or look for fillets of fish that have already had the bones removed. Tinned fish is a great choice for children as the bones are soft and can be safely eaten.

Try these simple recipes to encourage your child to enjoy fish at least once a week.



Fish goujons with sweet potato chips

Serves 4

Ingredients:

450g gurnard fillets (or other white fish fillets), skinned and cut into 5-7cm strips
2 large sweet potatoes
1 tablespoon olive oil
Lemon juice, dash
Salt and pepper
2 tablespoons runny honey
A few handfuls fresh breadcrumbs

Method:

- Preheat the oven to 190°C/gas mark 5
- Cut the sweet potato into chips, cook in the microwave for 2 minutes on a high setting
- Remove from the microwave and toss in olive oil, then roast in the oven for 10-15 minutes
- Place the fish in a large bowl, add lemon juice and seasoning. Add honey and stir gently to coat the fish pieces
- Toss the fish in the breadcrumbs. Place onto a lightly oiled ovenproof tray, bake for 8-10 minutes until golden brown.

Serve with the sweet potato chips, salad and tomato ketchup dip.



Sesame crusted salmon

Serves 4

Ingredients:

450g salmon fillet
(You could also use white fish fillets)
4 tablespoons sesame seeds *
Splash of olive oil for frying
Salad leaves
Ketchup or mayonnaise

Method:

- Cut the fish into thick 5-7cm long strips
- Place in a bowl with the sesame seeds and gently mix until all the fish is coated (You may need to press the fish into the seeds to help them to stick)
- Heat the oil in a non-stick frying pan, add the fish
- Fry over a medium heat turning gently until all the sides are golden and crispy
- Remove and drain on absorbent kitchen paper.

Serve with tossed salad and ketchup or mayonnaise.

* You could also use oatflakes



*For more information
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