

Toddlers 12-23 Months

Supporting Growth & Development



The toddler stage is an exciting time of discovery, rapid growth and new developmental milestones. Good nutrition helps power this progress and supports healthy development. After their first birthday, as babies transition from human milk or iron-fortified infant formula, whole milk and other dairy foods emerge as important sources of calories and essential nutrients to fuel brain development and growth spurts.¹



Dairy's Unique Contributions

Within the first 12 months, a baby's brain roughly doubles in size and reaches about 80% of adult size by age three.^{2,3} To fuel this incredible expansion, the infant brain alone uses over 50% of daily calories consumed.⁴ Whole milk provides a concentrated source of calories and nutrients during this time.⁵

Milk

Milk is considered one of the top food sources for several vitamins and minerals.¹



Protein helps build muscle.



Calcium, vitamin D and phosphorus help build strong bones and teeth.



B vitamins, like B12 and riboflavin, help turn food into fuel.



Protein, zinc, selenium, and Vitamins A, D and B12 help support a healthy immune system.



Iodine is linked to cognitive function in childhood.

Special Considerations



Toddlers are endlessly curious and at mealtimes it is no different. Though it may get messy, toddlers will want to try what the rest of the family is enjoying as they test out new tastes, textures and fine motor skills.

Recommended Daily Dairy Servings^{6,7}



About 2 cups

(for those no longer consuming breastmilk or iron-fortified formula)

This can be easily divided into several ½ cup (milk and yogurt) and ½ oz (cheese) servings throughout the day. Daily needs can vary between 12 to 23 months.





Make Every Bite & Sip Count

- ✓ Introduce a new food alongside a familiar food in the same meal.
- ✓ It may take several attempts – more than 10 times even – for babies and toddlers to accept new foods.⁸ Patience will pay off.
- ✓ Offer milk from a sippy-cup instead of a bottle to help toddlers build skills needed to transition them to an open cup.
- ✓ Toddlers know when they are full, so don't worry about them cleaning their plate – this will distort their innate hunger and fullness cues.
- ✓ Remember that making a mess is all part of the learning process. Encourage babies and toddlers to smell, feel and explore their food.

What Counts as a Serving of Dairy?

	Milk: 1 cup
	Lactose-free Milk: 1 cup
	Yogurt: ¾ cup
	Kefir: 1 cup
	American Cheese: 1 oz
	Shredded Cheese: ¼ cup
	Hard Cheese: 1 oz
	Ricotta Cheese: ¼ cup
	Cottage Cheese: ½ cup
	Fortified Dairy Alternatives: 1 cup

Serving sizes are based on the Daily Servings by Calorie Level supplement to the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Reference Amounts Customarily Consumed as defined by the Food and Drug Administration.



Simple Pairings to Try*

- ✓ Turkey and cheese pinwheels
- ✓ Mini whole wheat English muffin pizzas
- ✓ Cheese quesadillas with whole wheat tortillas and smashed avocado
- ✓ Yogurt parfaits



*Pairings are provided as nutritious examples – other combinations are possible.

Sources

1. Analyses of NHANES 2013-2014 & 2015-2016 data conducted by Victor Fulgoni, PhD. Analyses conducted using SAS 9.4 and SUDAAN 11 with survey parameters including strata, primary sampling units and dietary sample weights. Means were calculated using SAS proc survey means and percentages were calculated using SUDAAN proc ratio.
2. Gilmore JH, Knickmeyer RC, Gao W. Imaging structural and functional brain development in early childhood. *Nat Rev Neurosci.* 2018;19(3):123-137. doi:10.1038/nrn.2018.1
3. Bethlehem RAI, Seidlitz J, White SR, et al. Brain charts for the human lifespan. *Nature.* 2022;604(7906):525-533. doi:10.1038/s41586-022-04554-y
4. Kuzawa CW, Chugani HT, Grossman LI, et al. Metabolic costs and evolutionary implications of human brain development. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A.* 2014;111(36):13010-13015. doi:10.1073/pnas.1323099111
5. Murray, Bob. The Amazing Baby Brain Part 1: What Does Nutrition Have To Do With It? May 2018. Accessed on November 24, 2020 from <https://www.usdairy.com/news-articles/the-amazing-baby-brain-part-1>.
6. Committee on Nutrition. (2024, January 2). Serving sizes for toddlers. American Academy of Pediatrics. [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/nutrition/Pages/serving-sizes-for-toddlers.aspx). <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/nutrition/Pages/serving-sizes-for-toddlers.aspx>
7. U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030.
8. Tips to Help Your Picky Eater, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 10, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/features/help-picky-eater.html>



Milk, yogurt and cheese are nutrient-dense foods that can help nourish people throughout life. Dairy foods, including lactose-free varieties, are nutritious and accessible options that can help fill nutrient gaps and contribute to healthy eating patterns. To learn more about how dairy foods help people thrive across the lifespan, visit [USDairy.com](https://www.usdairy.com).