



NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Early Childhood Health and Wellness



# Choosing Healthy Beverages

**D**uring early childhood, children are establishing their taste preferences that tend to influence their diet for a lifetime. Choosing the right beverages for young children is just as important for their health as choosing the right foods. This is even more true for very young children because liquids represent a large portion of a young child's daily nutrition. Further, dietary patterns that last into the teenage years and beyond seem to be set by the age of 3-4 years.<sup>1</sup> This means that improving dietary patterns may be more difficult after a child reaches the age of 4.

Drinking sugar-sweetened beverages is associated with obesity, insulin resistance, and dental caries.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, a child's health can be improved, perhaps for a lifetime, by developing healthy drink preferences.

1. Singer MR, Moore LL, Garrahe EJ, Ellison RC. The tracking of nutrient intake in young children: the Framingham Children's Study. *Am J Public Health.* 1995;85:1673-7.

## Sugary Drinks and Oral Health

Sugar plays a key role in tooth decay. Bacteria in the mouth break down sugar and form acid. The acid, which is secreted long after the sugary drink is swallowed, leads to cavities. Each time a child consumes a drink with sugar or eats a starchy, chewy, or sticky food, acid is produced in the mouth for 20 to 40 minutes.

The figure below represents the acid levels in a child's mouth on a morning when a child consumes drinks with natural or added sugar often. The blue line in the shaded red area shows that acid is in the child's mouth almost all morning. If a child consumes drinks with sugar throughout the day on a regular basis, acid will be in his or her mouth for long periods of time, increasing the risk of tooth decay.

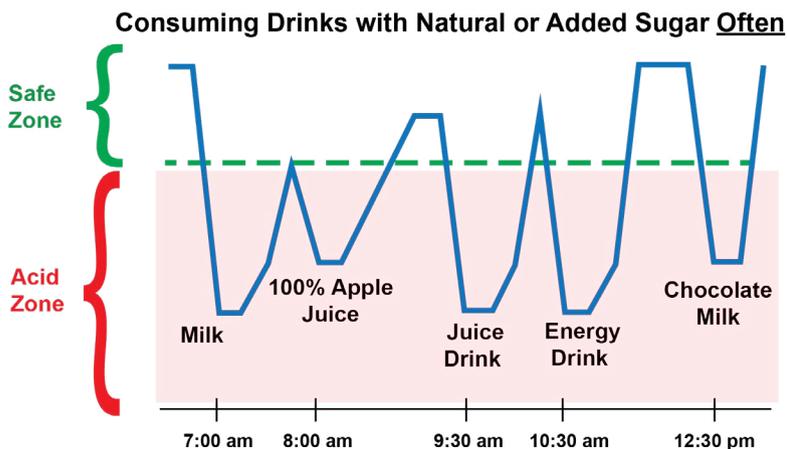
2. Bleich SN, Vercammen KA. The negative impact of sugar-sweetened beverages on children's health: an update of the literature. *BMC obesity.* 2018;5:6.



*Promoting healthy beverage intake during early childhood is a public health priority.*

Many research studies and reviews show an association between sugar-sweetened beverages and unhealthy weight in children and adults.<sup>4</sup> Sugar-sweetened drinks have low nutrient value and can replace nutritionally appropriate foods in a child's diet because these drinks make children feel full. A panel of experts from the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, American Heart Association, and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics convened an expert panel to review the research on beverages for young children. The expert panelists concluded that unflavored milk and water are the ideal beverages for children younger than age 5 to mitigate obesity, to help establish healthy nutritional preferences that will prevent obesity later in life, and to avoid dental caries.

4. Daniels SR. Healthy Beverage Consumption in Early Childhood: Recommendations from Key National Health and Nutrition Organizations. Healthy Eating Research Series. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; 2019.



## Sugary Drinks and Obesity

Unhealthy weight leads to a variety of health problems in both children and adults. A survey of Head Start health managers showed that 86% of managers reported that overweight and obesity in children in their program is a major concern.<sup>3</sup>

3. Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Head Start: Insights from the Head Start Health Manager Descriptive Study. OPRE Report #2016-85, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2016.





## Finding Hidden Sugar in Drinks

Drinks that contain natural or added sugar include:

- Milk, non-flavored
- Flavored milk, such as chocolate, strawberry, and vanilla milk
- Fruit juice, such as apple, grape, and orange juice
- Pop or soda, non-diet
- Fruit drinks, such as fruit punch and juice cocktails
- Vitamin water
- Sweetened teas
- Energy and sports drinks
- Toddler formula

Finding out whether a drink contains natural or added sugar is easy. The best place to check is in the ingredients list on the food label. Look for words like beet sugar, brown sugar, cane sugar, corn sweeteners, corn syrup, cane juice, evaporated cane juice, glucose, honey, malt syrup, maple syrup, high fructose corn syrup, molasses, raw sugar, sugar, or white sugar.

## Healthy Drinks for Children

### What should children drink?

**0-6 months:** Babies need only breast milk or infant formula to get enough fluids and proper nutrition.

**6-12 months:** In addition to breast milk or infant formula, offer a small amount of drinking water after a child has started to eat solid foods. This helps babies get familiar with the taste—just a few sips at meal times. Do not offer fruit juice.

**12-24 months:** Choose whole milk, which has many essential nutrients, along with plain drinking water for hydration. A small amount of juice is acceptable, but make sure it is 100% fruit juice. Better than juice, though, is real fruit, which is more nutritious and satisfying.

**2-5 years:** Milk and water are the best beverages. Look for milks with less fat than whole milk, like skim (non-fat) or low-fat (1%). If you choose to serve 100% fruit juice, limit it to 4-6 ounces per day.

All children younger than 5 years should avoid drinking:

- flavored milks (chocolate, strawberry)
- toddler formulas,
- plant-based or nondairy milks (almond, rice, oat),
- caffeinated beverages (e.g., soda, coffee, tea, energy drinks) and sugar- and low-calorie sweetened beverages (diet or light drinks, including those sweetened with stevia or sucralose)



## How Head Start Programs Support Healthy Beverage Choices

Your program can do the following things to support healthy drinking habits for children:

- Establish a policy stating that only milk and water is served to children with meals, snacks, parties, and other celebrations.
- Establish a policy that infants are not put to sleep with bottles or sippy cups filled with any drink other than water.
- Encourage Head Start staff to model healthy drinking habits.
- Encourage Head Start staff to educate parents about the effect of drinks with natural and added sugar on children's teeth and about making healthy drink choices.
- Remind Head Start staff to brush children's teeth with fluoride toothpaste and wipe infant's gums after meals.

Plant-based milk and nondairy milk alternatives lack key nutrients found in cow's milk. Unsweetened and fortified nondairy milks may be a good choice if a child is allergic to dairy milk, lactose intolerant, or whose family has decided not to eat animal products.

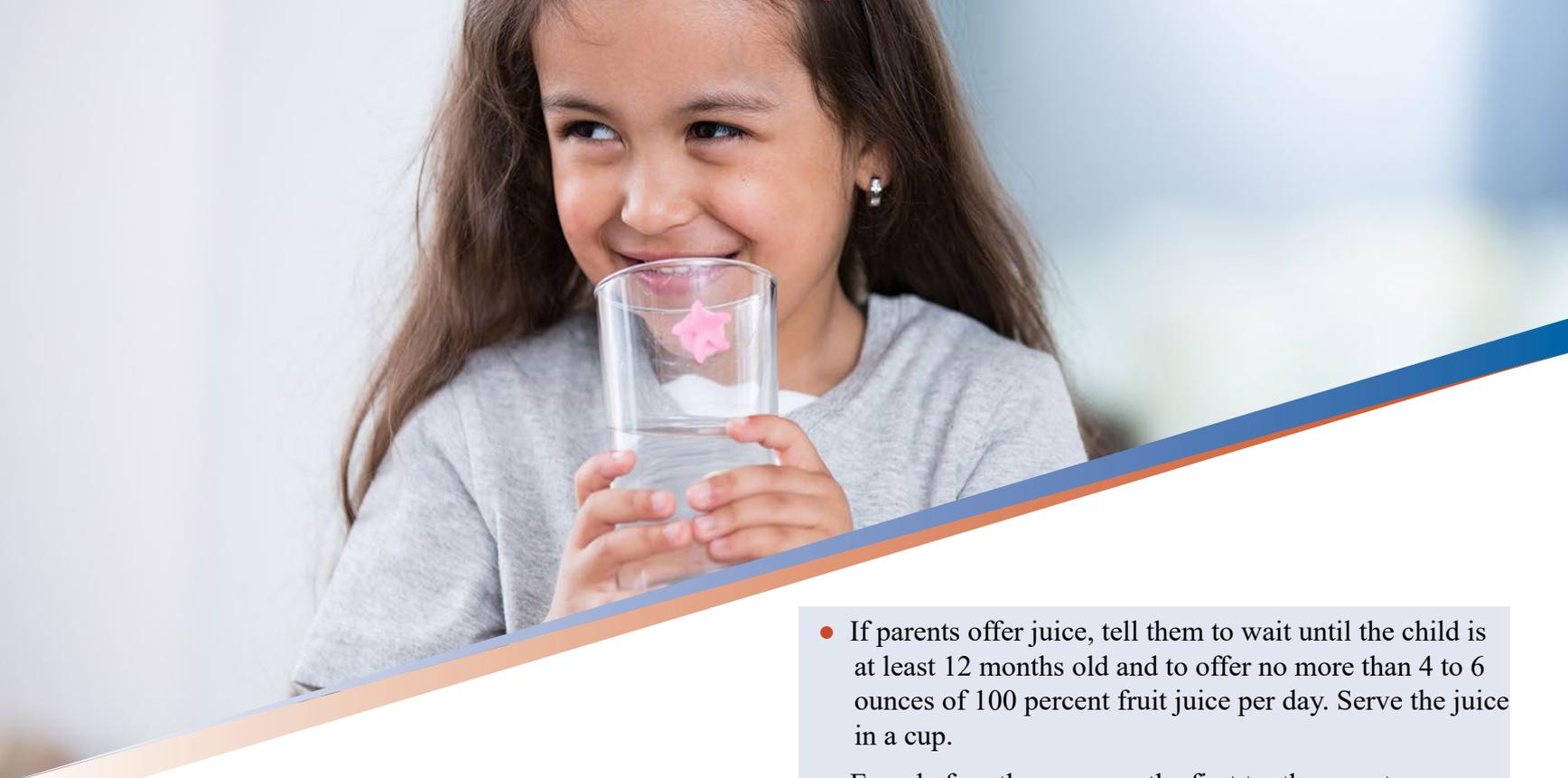
### What About 100% Fruit Juice?

Infants (12 months or younger) should not have juice of any kind. For toddler's or older children, water is the best beverage between meals. However, if a toddler or older child is not going to receive adequate fruit intake on a particular day, 100% fruit juice can supplement their fruit and vegetable intake up to the maximum indicated below:

- 1-3 years (12-36 months): No more than 4 ounces of 100% juice per day.
- 4-5 years (37-60 months): No more than 4 to 6 ounces of 100% juice per day

These are not minimum amounts; juice is only recommended as a way to provide sufficient fruit when daily intake is not sufficient. Whole fruit is always preferred to fruit juice because whole fruit has more nutrients.





## Tips for Working with Families

- Use the resources (handouts, toolkit, infographics) created by the experts at [Healthy Drinks Healthy Kids](#) to educate parents on the role beverages with natural or added sugar plays in tooth decay and overweight.
- Teach parents how to find sugar in the ingredients list in food and drink labels.
- Do not let children carry a bottle or sippy cup containing drinks with natural or added sugar during the day. Sippy cups should contain only water, unless being used at mealtime.
- Teach parents that children should not be put to sleep with bottles or sippy cups containing drinks with natural or added sugar.
- Encourage parents to give children water, ideally fluoridated tap water, between meals.
- Encourage parents to serve milk at scheduled meal and snack times.
- Tell parents fruit is for eating rather than drinking. Suggest parents give children frozen or fresh fruit that has been mashed or cut into bite-size pieces instead of juice.

- If parents offer juice, tell them to wait until the child is at least 12 months old and to offer no more than 4 to 6 ounces of 100 percent fruit juice per day. Serve the juice in a cup.
- Even before they can see the first tooth, parents can use a clean, damp washcloth to clean the baby's gums. Encourage parents to clean the baby's gum twice a day, especially after night feeding.
- Tell parents to begin brushing the baby's teeth with fluoride toothpaste as soon as the first tooth appears in the baby's mouth. For children younger than 3 years, use a smear (grain of rice) of fluoride toothpaste. For children 3 years and older, use a pea-sized amount of fluoride toothpaste. Encourage parents to brush the child's teeth twice a day, especially before bed.





## For Your Family Newsletter

Here are some tips for families that can be tailored for your family newsletters:

- Water from the tap is the best drink to serve between meals because it contains fluoride, has no sugar, and does not promote tooth decay. Here's why:
- Drinks with natural or added sugar cause tooth decay and are associated with obesity.
- Sugar-free drinks like diet soda can also harm teeth. They contain acid that can wear away the outer covering of teeth, making it thinner and more likely to decay.

**Model it:** Be a good role model by drinking water instead of drinks with sugar. Young children learn by watching, and you are your child's best role model.

**Offer it:** Offer water when your child is thirsty between meals. Don't give your child any other drink choices.

**Make it fun:** Let your child drink from single-use bendy, silly, or colored straws. Or let your child choose a favorite cup or water bottle.

**Keep it portable:** Water bottles can be carried anywhere and refilled with tap water.

**Flavor it:** Add a slice of lemon, lime, orange or cucumber or fresh mint leaves to water. Or add fruit like blueberries, raspberries, or strawberries. Never add sugar to water.

**Ice it:** Serve water with ice cubes or crushed ice. Look for ice cube trays in fun shapes like dinosaurs, letters, or animals.

**Make it available:** Set up a station where your child can get a drink of water when he or she is thirsty. It can be as simple as keeping a nonbreakable water pitcher on a low counter or on a chair where your child can reach it.

## Resources

[Healthy Drinks Healthy Kids](#)

[Brush Up Oral Health Tip Sheet Series](#)

[From Baby Bottle to Cup: Choose Training Cups Carefully, Use Them Temporarily](#) (from the American Dental Association)

[Make Better Beverage Choices: 10 Tips to Get Started](#) (from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Center for Nutrition and Policy and Promotion, in English and Spanish)



## NATIONAL CENTER ON Early Childhood Health and Wellness

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View other topics in the Embracing Health and Wellness Series on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/health-services-management/article/embracing-health-wellness-series>

**Our Goal:** To help Head Start and Early Head Start programs implement best practices and effective approaches within the areas of medical and dental care access, health awareness, healthy active living, emergency preparedness, and environmental safety to support healthy outcomes and school readiness for young children and their families.

**Contact Us:** The National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness welcomes your feedback as well as your suggestions for topics for future resources! Please forward your comments to: [health@ecetta.info](mailto:health@ecetta.info) or call us at 888-227-5125.

***School readiness begins with health!***