

What to leave off the menu

Early childhood services

When children eat a nutritious diet they learn better and are more likely to grow and develop to their full potential.

Providing a healthy menu also assists with promoting healthy eating and is a requirement of the [National Quality Standard](#). [1]

‘Discretionary’ foods and drinks are high in energy, saturated fat, salt and/or sugar and have little nutritional value.

They include lollies, chocolate, crisps, cakes, biscuits, ice cream, fried foods and sugary drinks.

→ 01 Discretionary foods

There are some foods and drinks which are not necessary for a nutritious diet. These are known as ‘discretionary choices’ (figure 1).

Discretionary choices are high in saturated fat, salt and/or added sugar and low in fibre. They provide little nutritional value, and are high in energy (kilojoules), and therefore don’t meet the Victorian [Menu planning guidelines](#) for early childhood education and care services. [2]

The problem with discretionary food and drinks

For 2-3 year olds in Australia, one third of their daily energy intake comes from ‘discretionary’ food and drinks like biscuits, confectionary and chips. [4]

Regularly consuming discretionary items can increase the risk of dental caries, weight gain, and diet related conditions later in life. [5]

In addition, if discretionary foods are a large part of a child's diet they can take the place of healthier foods like fruit and vegetables, which children aren’t getting enough of.

Figure 1: discretionary choices in the Australian Dietary Guidelines [3]



Examples of discretionary food and drinks

- confectionery, chocolate, jelly, lollies
- chips and high fat/salty savoury biscuits/crackers
- high sugar/fat biscuits, cakes, muffins, loaves and slices
- cream, sour cream and ice cream
- deep fried foods and most take away foods

- pastry foods such as cheese pinwheels, pies, sausage rolls, pasties
- some processed meats (e.g. sausages, frankfurts/hot dogs, salami, strasburg, devon, some commercial chicken nuggets and fish fingers)
- soft drinks, fruit drinks, cordial, sports drinks, sports waters, flavoured waters, flavoured mineral waters, iced teas and energy drinks.

→ 02 Healthier baked items

Cakes, slices, biscuits, loaves and muffins are usually classified as discretionary foods because they are contain too much added sugar and saturated fat (e.g. butter) which makes them high in energy.

You can make baked items more beneficial for health by changing the ingredients to include fruit and/or vegetables, wholemeal flour, and reducing the added sugar and oils.

**→ 03 Treats and special occasions**

If you want to offer children a special treat, it's better to offer a non-food treat such as stickers, a fun activity or a knickknack of their choice.

When food and drinks are provided for special occasions, there's many healthy options that kids will love.

Make it fun and healthy by using foods from the five food groups. For example, watermelon can make a delicious birthday cake; decorate with fresh colourful fruits such as sliced kiwi, star cut outs of cantaloupe and mixed berries.





References:

1. National Quality Standard, Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2013, www.acecqa.gov.au
2. Menu planning guidelines, Healthy Eating Advisory Service, Department of Health and Human Services, State Government of Victoria, 2012, www.heas.health.vic.gov.au
3. Australian Dietary Guidelines, National Health and Medical Research Council, 2013, www.eatforhealth.gov.au
4. Australian Health Survey: Nutrition First Results - Food and Nutrients, 2011-12, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013, www.abs.gov.au
5. Australian Dietary Guidelines, National Health and Medical Research Council, 2013, www.eatforhealth.gov.au

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