

Plant-Based Diet for Kids: Weight Gain

1. **Offer more of the higher calorie foods and less low-calorie foods.** Small children's stomachs tend to fill up quickly and then they lose interest in eating. For weight gain, aim to fill them with **more** of the higher calorie foods and **less** low-calorie foods.

Higher calorie foods:

- Foods naturally high in fat: nuts/nut pastes, seeds/seed pastes (e.g. tahini), avocado, margarine, oil (e.g. olive oil), coconut cream.
- Foods naturally high in protein: Soy products and legumes: Tofu, tempeh, lentils, chickpeas, other legumes, full-fat soymilk, full-fat yoghurt (e.g. soy, coconut).
- Starchy foods: Grains and cereals: e.g. oats, pasta, rice, bread, potato, sweet potato, corn.
- Other foods: Hummus (if buying, look for the bran with the highest fat content), dried fruit (e.g. dates, dried apricots)

Lower calorie foods:

- Most fresh/frozen fruit (except avocado)
- Most vegetables – other than potato, corn, peas.

This does not mean you should stop giving your child fruit and vegetables, but sometimes the relative amounts need to be decreased. While we tell adults to "make their plate half full of vegetables" this is not going to help a small child gain weight. Having $\frac{1}{4}$ of the volume of the meal as vegetables is enough when poor growth has been an issue.

Also, although fruit is regarded as a "healthy" food, many children tend to fill up on fruit, which displaces other (more nutritious and higher calorie) foods. For a child under two years, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of fruit per day is enough and one cup per day is generally enough for children under eight years who have poor growth.

2. **Boost meals with added high fat foods.** Extra calories can be added to meals in the following ways:
 - Add tahini to meals.
 - Mix peanut butter with a little coconut milk or soymilk or lemon juice to make a peanut sauce. Pour this onto meals.
 - Stir some olive oil or margarine into rice or pasta just before serving.
 - Stir some oil or coconut cream or high fat yoghurt (soy or coconut) to meals when serving.
 - Fry some foods, especially those that will soak up a lot of oil – e.g. potatoes, tofu, tempeh, rice.
3. **Get into a routine.** Offer meals and snacks, keeping timing fairly consistent.
4. **Offer 3 meals and 2-3 snacks per day.** Because children fill up quickly, it is important to offer them nutritious snacks between meals. (However, it is not advised to let children "graze" all day.) Offer a morning snack and an afternoon snack. An after-dinner snack can be appropriate too, but it generally not advised to give a snack just before bedtime.
5. **Eat with your child at the table.** Avoid distractions such as toys or books at the table or having the TV on.

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6. **Keep mealtimes pleasant.** Don't try to force your child to eat.
7. **Don't overdo the fibre.** Fibre is generally beneficial, but too much fibre can be a problem for small children, as it fills them up, which can lead to them eating less. To assist with increasing calorie intake, fibre can be reduced in the following ways:
 - Offer white rice and white pasta instead of brown/wholemeal. Wholemeal pasta is very high in fibre and may be unsuitable for young children.
 - Offer lower fibre high protein foods: e.g. tofu, tempeh, textured vegetable protein (TVP) and red lentils are lower in fibre than brown lentils, chickpeas or kidney beans. Black beans are very high in fibre so avoid these if seeking weight gain. Removing the skins of legumes (e.g. by pressing through a sieve) will lower the fibre content.
 - Reduce fibre content of vegetables by removing the stalks from kale, Asian greens, silver beet, spinach, etc.
 - For Omega 3s, use flaxseed oil rather than flaxseeds, chia seeds or other seeds. (1-2 tsp flaxseed oil per day is the recommended amount for children from 12 months of age).
8. **Offer more nutritious drinks, less water.** Water is a great thirst quencher, but it has no calories. Substituting some water with a nutritious drink such as full-fat soymilk will boost calorie intake. Give full-fat fortified soymilk as a drink with morning and afternoon tea and avoid offering water until after the soymilk has been consumed. Don't give water or other drinks just before meals or with meals as they can make a child feel full, leading them to eat less. After meals and between meals is the best time to offer drinks.
9. **Watch intake of hard/crunchy foods.** While it is recommended for children to eat some hard/crunchy foods (once they have mastered this safely) for their jaw development, don't overdo foods such as raw apples and raw or very lightly cooked vegetables. These are harder and slower for children to eat and for weight gain the aim is to make it easier to get more calories in. If poor weight gain has been an issue, reducing the amount of crunchy fruits and vegetables and instead offering softer fruits and well-cooked vegetables can help to increase your child's calorie intake.
10. **Ensure your child is taking necessary supplements.** Vitamin and mineral deficiencies can interfere with appetite and feeding behaviour. If your child has been unwell or not eating enough, a multivitamin supplement might be prudent, but it is recommended that professional advice be obtained on this.
11. **Have your child's growth and development monitored.** Visit a child health clinic or other child health professional regularly to have your child's development assessed and their weight, height and head circumference measured and plotted onto growth charts.
12. **Always seek professional advice if you have any concerns about your child's health, growth or development.** Don't risk your child's health by relying on advice from unqualified people.



SAMPLE MEAL PLAN for boosting a child's daily calorie intake

Breakfast:

Weet-Bix or cooked oats (cooked in full fat soymilk) + ¼ cup fruit (choose a vitamin C-rich fruit such as berries, kiwi, mango, pawpaw, citrus) + 2tsp flaxseed oil.

ADDITION: (1) Stir in one tablespoon of tahini or nut butter – this adds about 600kJ/150 calories. (2) Top with ¼ cup coconut yoghurt – this adds another 400kJ/100calories.

Snacks:

½ cup full fat soymilk PLUS

- Bread or crackers with nut butter (spread thickly) and/or avocado and/or high fat hummus.
- A high fat yoghurt (e.g. coconut yoghurt) with a small amount of fruit – e.g. ½ cup yoghurt, 1/4/ cup fruit
- Homemade soy custard with a small amount of fruit
- Dates cut in half and filled with nut butter
- Fruit/nut balls made with equal volumes (all blended together until smooth-ish) of nuts/seeds and dried fruit/dates. Add some tahini or peanut butter or maple syrup to assist binding and a dash of orange juice is required. (Can add cocoa/cacao or cinnamon to vary flavour if desired.) Roll into balls and then roll in desiccated coconut.
- Baked treats made with flour, soymilk, oil/margarine, etc. Avoid using wholemeal flour if poor weight gain has been an issue as it is very high in fibre.

Lunch:

½ cup white rice or pasta or mashed potato or a slice of bread PLUS

½ cup fried tofu or tempeh or cooked red lentils (cook/add 2 tsp oil) PLUS

2 tablespoons cooked green vegetables (e.g. green peas, well-cooked leafy greens)

(Add a squeeze of lemon or lime juice to increase iron absorption.) PLUS

2 tablespoons red/orange/yellow vegetables (e.g. pumpkin, carrot, corn, tomato)

ADDITIONS: (1) Stir in/add 2tsp olive oil or margarine to rice/pasta/mashed potato/bread – this adds about 340kJ/80 calories. (2) Top with 1 tbsp tahini or peanut butter (thin with soymilk) or 3 slices (60g) avocado – this adds about 540kJ/130 calories. (3) Top with 3tbsp hummus or coconut cream – this adds about 450kJ/110 calories.

Snack:

As per morning options, but don't give fruit at afternoon tea if given at morning tea.

Dinner:

Same pattern/components and addition options at lunch.

After dinner:

Some soy or coconut yoghurt or custard or a drink of soymilk (could make into a chocolate drink)

NOTE: The above recommendations are generic in nature but are aimed specifically at young children on a plant-based diet who are experiencing poor growth, not all young children. Not all recommendations will be appropriate for all children and working with a dietitian is strongly recommended if your child's growth is poor.

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