



# Eat Your Vegetables – That Means You, Parents!

*“Eat your vegetables!” is a plea often heard around family dinner tables. Why is it that many young children don’t seem to like vegetables? Are kids just born that way? It turns out that taste preferences are, in fact, developed prenatally.*

Research conducted by Leann Birch, Ph.D., at Pennsylvania State University shows that unborn babies may detect taste differences as early as the 13th week of pregnancy.

## **Prenatal influences**

The taste of amniotic fluid changes with the foods the mother eats. Pregnant women who eat a wide variety of foods, including vegetables, expose their children to different tastes. Babies’ gulp rate of amniotic fluid increases when sweetness is present. Even unborn babies like dessert!

Breast milk is another way nursing babies are exposed to a variety of different tastes. The taste of formula is consistent from bottle to bottle, but the taste of breast milk changes based on what the nursing mom eats. Eating a wide variety of vegetables gives a nursing baby a sample of what’s to come once he starts solids after 6 months of age.

## **Toddler experimentation**

Early exposure is an important factor in encouraging children to develop a taste for vegetables. Give your baby a wide variety of steamed vegetables cut in small pieces as soon as she can safely eat them. Some nutritionists recommend exposing your child to as many as 200 different foods by the age of 2. Toddlers typically become more selective about the foods they will accept. The more opportunity your toddler has to experiment with different tastes, the more willing she will be to accept variety. Your child may narrow her food choices in the preschool years, but she is more likely to eat



a variety of vegetables later on if she has been exposed to them early.

## **Texture counts, too**

After your child has teeth and is able to chew solid foods safely, present him with a variety of textures. Cooked green beans are crunchy and mashed sweet potatoes are smooth. Expose your child to both. Part of the reason children reject vegetables is that they don’t like the feel of them in their mouths. Don’t fall into the habit of giving your child only foods with smooth, slippery textures.



Does your child have to eat a heaping helping of steamed spinach to be exposed to it? Experts say a child may have to taste a new food 15 to 25 times before he is ready to eat a few bites. Don't worry about counting and don't be concerned with rejection; just keep putting those lima beans on the plate and cheerfully encouraging your child to take a taste. Smelling and touching foods also count as exposures. Let your curious toddler touch and smooch his zucchini. Some just may wind up in his mouth!

### **It starts with YOU!**

You are the most important model for your child's good eating habits. Fill your plate with a variety of nutritious foods, including vegetables. Let your child see that you enjoy – or are willing to taste – vegetables and other nutritious foods. Young children often want a taste of what you are eating. Encourage them to taste the vegetables on your plate. Good nutrition is something you want to share!

### **Minding your peas and carrots: Tips for lifelong veggie-loving**

- > Start early.
- > Introduce 200 foods before age 2.
- > Offer a vegetable 15-25 times.
- > Let kids smell, touch and taste veggies.
- > Eat vegetables **with** your child.

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