

## TIPS TO HELP CHILDREN ON A PLANT-BASED DIET GAIN WEIGHT

### 1. Offer MORE of the higher calorie foods and LESS of the lower 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** of lower calorie foods (See below for examples and ideas.)

#### Higher calorie foods:

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

#### 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 half their plate 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 / weight gain 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 2 years,  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of fruit per day is enough, and one cup per day is generally enough for children under 8 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 or sliced avocado on top of 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 into wet dishes (eg dhal, bean dishes)
- Add some margarine to potato / mashed potato.
- Add a big dollop of 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. 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: eg tofu, tempeh, Textured Vegetable Protein (TVP) and red lentils are lower in fibre than brown lentils, chick peas or kidney beans. Black beans are very high in fibre so avoid these if seeking weight gain. Removing the skins of legumes (eg 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. (2 tsp flaxseed oil per day is the recommended amount for children from 12 months of age.)

#### **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 is generally not advised to give a snack just before bedtime.
- Snack ideas:
  - Bread or crackers with nut butter (spread thickly) and/or avocado and/or a high fat hommus.
  - A high fat yoghurt (eg coconut yoghurt) with a small amount of fruit – eg ½ cup yoghurt, ¼ 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 of (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 if required. (Can add cocoa/cacao or cinnamon to vary flavor if desired.) Roll into balls and then roll in desiccated coconut.
  - Baked treats made with flour, soy milk, oil/margarine etc. Avoid using wholemeal wheat flour if poor weight gain has been an issue as it is very high in fibre.

#### **5. 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 fullfat soymilk will boost calorie intake. Although juice is not generally recommended for small children, a small amount can be offered diluted with water to add extra calories to children needing increased weight gain.
- 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.

#### **6. Watch intake of hard/ crunchy foods.**

While it is definitely recommended for children to eat some hard and 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.

#### **7. Get into a routine with offering meals and snacks, keeping timing fairly consistent.**

- 8. Eat with your child at the table and model good eating habits. Avoid distractions such as toys or books at the table, TV on etc.**
- 9. Keep mealtimes pleasant. Encourage but never try to force your child to eat.**

10. Ensure your child is taking necessary supplements (such as vitamin B12, DHA, vitamin D) as 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 best to obtain professional advice on this.
11. Have your child's growth (weight, height and head circumference) monitored regularly (e.g. at a child health centre) and plotted onto growth charts.
12. Always seek professional advice if you have any concerns about your child's health, growth or development.

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

##### **Breakfast:**

Cooked or presoaked oats (cooked or soaked in fullfat soymilk) + ¼ cup fruit (choose a vitamin C-rich fruit such as berries, kiwi, mango, pawpaw, citrus) + 2 tsp flaxseed oil.

ADDITION: (1) Stir in one tablespoon of tahini or nut butter – this adds about 600 kJ/ 150 calories.

(2) Top with ¼ cup coconut yoghurt – this adds another 400 KJ / 100 calories.

##### **Snack:**

See snack ideas above PLUS ½ cup fullfat soymilk (could make into a smoothie with the fruit and yoghurt if desired, but generally smoothies are not recommended as a regular food for small children.)

##### **Lunch:**

½ cup white rice or pasta or mashed potato or a slice of bread + ½ cup fried tofu or tempeh or cooked red lentils (cook/add 2 tsp oil) + 2 tablespoons cooked green vegetables (eg green peas, well-cooked leafy greens) (Add a squeeze of lemon or lime juice to increase iron absorption.) + 2 tablespoons red/orange/yellow vegetables (eg pumpkin, carrot, corn, tomato)

ADDITIONS: (1) Stir in /add 2 tsp olive oil or margarine to rice/pasta/mashed potato/bread – this adds about 340 KJ / 80 calories

(2) Top with 1 tbsp tahini or peanut butter (thin with soy milk) or 3 slices (60g) avocado – this adds about 540 kJ / 130 calories.

(3) Top with 3 tbsp hommus or coconut cream – this adds about 450 kJ / 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 as lunch.

**After dinner:** Some soy or coconut yoghurt or custard or a drink of soy milk (could make into a chocolate drink)

**NOTE:** The above recommendations are generic in nature but are aimed at young children on a plant-based diet who are experiencing poor growth or poor weight gain, not at 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 or weight gain is poor. The above is not intended to replace individualized advice from an appropriately qualified health professional. Please always get professional advice if you have any concerns about your child's health, growth or development.

Information compiled by Amanda Benham, Accredited Practising Dietitian © 2019

For more information, go to [www.humanherbivore.com](http://www.humanherbivore.com)