TODDLER

Complete Toddler Nutrition Guide: Age 1–3 Requirements, Servings & Best Foods

Everything parents need to know about toddler nutrition for ages 1–3. Daily requirements for iron, calcium, protein, vitamins, and the best foods to meet them all.

Key Takeaways

- Toddlers aged 1–3 need approximately 1,000–1,400 calories per day from a wide variety of whole foods.
- Iron is the most commonly deficient nutrient in toddlers — prioritise red meat, legumes, and fortified grains daily.
- Calcium needs are 700 mg per day (age 1–3); 2–3 dairy servings meets this without excessive milk volume.
- Vitamin D supplementation (600 IU/day) is recommended when dietary intake is insufficient.
- Toddlers eating a varied diet from all food groups rarely need a multivitamin — real food first.

Frequently Asked Questions

What nutrients are most important for toddlers?

The most critical nutrients for toddlers are iron (brain development, red blood cells), calcium (bone growth), vitamin D (calcium absorption), protein (muscle and tissue growth), zinc (immune function and growth), and omega-3 fatty acids (brain and eye development). Iron is the most frequently deficient.

Do toddlers need a multivitamin?

Most toddlers eating a reasonably varied diet do not need a multivitamin. The AAP recommends vitamin D supplementation (600 IU/day) if dietary intake is insufficient. Iron should be checked at the 12-month well visit. If your toddler eats fewer than 20 different foods or excludes entire food groups, discuss supplementation with your pediatrician.

How much protein does a toddler need per day?

Toddlers aged 1–3 need approximately 13 grams of protein per day. This is easily met with a varied diet: one egg provides 6 g, 2 tablespoons of chicken provides about 7 g, and 2 tablespoons of lentils provides about 4 g. Protein deficiency is rare in toddlers eating meat, dairy, eggs, or legumes.

Can toddlers be vegetarian or vegan?

Yes, but extra planning is required. Vegetarian toddlers need reliable iron from fortified cereals, legumes, tofu, and dark leafy greens; calcium from dairy or fortified plant milks; and vitamin B12 from fortified foods or supplements. Vegan toddlers additionally need DHA from algae-based supplements and may need zinc and iodine supplementation. Consult a pediatric dietitian.

What foods prevent iron deficiency in toddlers?

Best iron sources for toddlers: red meat (beef, lamb), dark poultry meat, oily fish, eggs, lentils, chickpeas, black beans, tofu, iron-fortified toddler cereals, quinoa, and dark leafy greens. Always pair plant-based iron with vitamin C (citrus, capsicum, strawberry) to increase absorption.

How much calcium does a toddler need?

Toddlers aged 1–3 need 700 mg of calcium per day. This is easily met with 2–3 servings of dairy: 1 cup of whole milk provides 300 mg, 4 oz of yogurt provides about 150 mg, and 1 oz of cheese provides about 200 mg. Non-dairy sources include calcium-fortified plant milk, soft tofu, and broccoli.

Sources

1. Dietary Reference Intakes for Toddlers — National Academies — Institute of Medicine
2. Iron Deficiency in Toddlers — CDC
3. Vitamin D and Calcium — HealthyChildren.org — AAP
4. Omega-3 Fatty Acids for Children — Nutrients Journal — NIH
5. Dietary Guidelines 2020–2025 — USDA and HHS