

Ask Smallish

Our panel of EXPERTS offers advice and support on your RELATIONSHIP, pregnancy and parenting problems

Q My child wants to turn vegan, how should I make sure they have a healthy diet?

A DR ALEXANDRA PHELAN: Veganism and vegetarianism are gaining popularity in the UK. Recent research shows that there are at least half a million vegans in the UK and approximately 1.2 million vegetarians. So, what should you do if your child wants to give up meat, fish, eggs and even dairy? If your child feels strongly, you should support them, but ensure their diet is nutrient-rich. Well-planned vegetarian or vegan diets can contain all the nutrients your child needs to stay healthy.

The way in which you react to your child's dietary decisions is key. As children grow, they need the space to develop and assert their own opinions. Rather than turning their dietary choices into a battle, ask your child about why they have made this decision. Set an example of how to listen to and respect other people's choices.

In can be daunting when your child wants to eat a different diet to the rest of the family. It can be tempting to turn to processed vegetarian and vegan ready-meals, but these can be high in fat, salt or sugar. Research what your child can and can't eat, and get them to help you plan meals, buy and prepare food – that way, they won't feel ostracised or different at meal times.

Research has shown that eating less meat has nutritional benefits – so eating a vegetarian or vegan meal once or twice a week will also be good for the whole family's health.

You should take steps to ensure your children are consuming the full range of nutrients essential for healthy growth and development. The Department of Health recommends all children from

the age of six months to five years be given a daily supplement containing vitamins A, C and D.

Vegan and vegetarian diets can be lacking in protein. Many vegetarians will supplement their diets with dairy products, namely cheese, but this needs to be consumed in moderation as it is high in saturated fat. Nut and seed butters, lentils, tofu and beans are good alternative sources of protein that children need to support their growth.

Meals that are plant-based can be filling, but lack enough energy for youngsters; bananas, avocados, hummus and nut butters are good sources of energy.

Bread, beans, lentils, dark green vegetables and figs can provide the iron that is required for healthy blood and cognitive development. Vegan diets can also be lacking in calcium and vitamin B12, which are important for the brain and nervous system. These essential elements are found in dairy products and meat. Substitutes can be found in certain varieties of flour, cereal and plant or nut milk.

Flaxseed, linseed and walnut oils all contain omega-3 fatty acids, which are often lacking in a vegan or vegetarian diet. Omega-3 fatty acids are found mainly in oily fish, like salmon, so pescetarians should eat one portion of oily fish a week (tinned tuna doesn't count).

A balanced and varied diet without too much fat or sugar is beneficial for all children, whether they are pescetarian, vegetarian, vegan or not.

Q My child negotiates with me constantly – she says: "I'll clean up my room if I can have iPad time." What should I do?

A MELISSA HOOD: Nobody likes to feel they're being manipulated or that their kids are calling the shots. Children should do what they're asked because it is the right thing to do, not because they'll get given something for it.

Our children need to believe what they are doing is the correct course of action and be motivated to do the right thing. That doesn't happen overnight because parents wish

it or because we tell them it is expected, but it comes about due to the behaviours we model and by using rules to help the child form habits. Habits are encouraged by giving attention and approval, and initially by the use of rewards.

Think about how your children learn to brush their teeth. You show them how to do it and they watch you brushing your own teeth. Then you encourage them to do it independently and praise them, maybe offering rewards, like an extra story at bedtime. You explain the reasons why we need to brush our teeth and try to make it more fun by pulling faces in the mirror. You comment on how good a job they're doing, so they learn to brush their teeth well.

Eventually, they absorb oral hygiene as a value for themselves. Rewards played a part in the process, but only for a short time to get the habit started.

If your child is negotiating compensation for doing things, it may be the way you've been using rewards that is the problem. Instead of rewarding to acknowledge your child's efforts after the event, you may have been offering a bribe beforehand to induce good behaviour. This is as manipulative as our children seeking to coerce us.

Encourage good behaviours by having clear rules, and motivating and acknowledging children through descriptive praise. It's also vital to make language intentional, so instead of saying: "If I let you have 30 minutes on the iPad, you must do your homework after," try: "When you've done your homework, you will have earned time on the iPad."

Q My four-year-old suffers with hay fever – what can I do to help her through the summer?

A DR YIANNIS IOANNOU: Hay fever, or seasonal allergic rhinitis, is a common condition affecting children and adults. They may have an itchy, blocked or runny nose, sneezing and red, watery and itchy eyes. Symptoms vary from mild to severe and are caused by the immune system reacting to allergens in the air, such as pollen from trees and grass. Different types of pollen are present throughout the year, and grasses are the biggest culprits in summer.

Avoiding exposure to pollen can be difficult. Keep windows closed in the car and avoid going out on windy days and after thunderstorms, wear sunglasses to protect eyes, don't hang clothes outside, and stay in when the lawn is being mown. Antihistamines, steroid nasal sprays and eye drops can help and are available without prescription.

Hay fever can affect sleep, development, concentration

and school performance, so don't ignore the signs. Your GP can assess the severity, examine for other causes and associated allergic conditions, like eczema and asthma, and suggest a treatment. Assessment by a specialist in paediatric allergy, and skin prick tests or blood tests may be required.

Q I had mastitis with my first baby and am worried it will happen with my second. Help!

A TERESA WALSH: Mastitis can affect any breastfeeding mum; just because you have had the condition once, it does not mean you are more prone. It will, however, make you anxious as you will want to avoid getting it again. Mastitis is an inflammation within the breast tissue. When you are breastfeeding, the milk needs

to transfer freely into the ducts and be suckled into your baby's mouth. If this is restricted, the milk will build up in the ducts and leak into the breast tissue.

“ Hay fever can be very disruptive, affecting sleep, development, concentration and performance ”

Symptoms can include a lump or area of hardness in the breast that may become swollen, feel hot and be painful to touch; a burning sensation in the breast that is deep and continuous or occurs when breastfeeding; white or streaky bloody discharge from your nipple, or aches, fever, chills and tiredness.

Most mastitis is caused by a build-up of milk within the breast. It is known as milk stasis and is caused by the baby not latching onto the breast correctly, or sometimes missing feeds, or a very long gap between a feed.

The build-up in milk can become infected and this is known as infective mastitis. It is important to treat blocked ducts before they get infected, so you may need antibiotics.

There are things you can do to avoid mastitis occurring. It is recommended that you breastfeed exclusively for six months; encourage your baby to feed frequently; ensure your baby is well attached to your breast during feeds and let them release the breast themselves when they're finished. Also avoid pressure on your breasts from tight clothing.

If you do develop a blocked duct or mastitis, see your GP. A risk factor for recurring mastitis is failure to recover from a previous bout.

THE PANEL



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