

Comments from Emily Robinson, Senior Nutritionist – Chartwells Independent

It's really important that we help to establish healthy eating habits in the early years at our nurseries, and provide lots of variety for the little ones, to start to expose their taste buds to different flavours and try new foods. Variety is key, and so we have ensured that our menu is on a 3 week cycle, and mixed up the types of food from each of the main food groups offered each week (starchy carbohydrates, protein, dairy, fruits and vegetables) to ensure a good balance.

A variety of fruit and/or vegetables are part of every eating occasion for the children (breakfast, morning snack, lunch, afternoon snack and afternoon tea), and every child will be getting at least 3 of their 5 a day each day. Salad options are also provided at every lunch time, as well as at afternoon tea, meaning the children will be exposed to trying lots of different veggies throughout the day! Where we can, we have also tried to really utilise seasonal fruit and vegetables on the menu.

A source of carbohydrate is provided at every main mealtime for the children, which is really key to help provide them with the energy their bodies need for the remainder of the day.

We have ensured that wholegrains are on offer throughout the week (e.g. oatcakes, wholemeal and 50/50 pitta and bread, cereals, oats, wholemeal flour used in some cakes) – however a combination of white, wholegrain and 50/50 carbohydrates are used throughout the week; this is important to ensure children are getting some fibre into their tummies (which can help to keep the digestive system healthy), whilst ensuring they are getting all of the energy and nutrients they need. Giving too much fibre to toddlers can sometimes mean they become full before they have had enough energy and other nutrients – this is why we have a balance of white, wholegrain and 50/50.

Plain yoghurt is used in the morning, without the use of any added sugar. Milk and dairy products (e.g. cheese, yogurt) are provided across the week, at least 3 times per day, which will provide the children with a great source of protein and calcium. Calcium is super important for little ones whilst they are growing, to help them build and maintain strong bones and teeth. Milk and dairy also provide iodine, which is important for healthy nerve and brain function.

All of our desserts on the menu have been made to ensure lower added sugar content, and will be either fruit, vegetable and/or milk based. We have worked hard to ensure that we use fruit and vegetables as natural sweeteners as ingredients.

A vegetarian option is available each day at lunch (as well as at all eating occasions), and a wide variety of plant based protein sources (e.g. beans, chickpeas, pulses and Quorn) are used throughout the week for vegetarians. Beans and pulses are a great way to add extra flavours, colours and texture to meals; but most importantly, they are very nutritious! Beans and pulses are packed with protein, fibre and iron, and they also count towards 1 of your 5 a day.

Throughout each week there is a really good mix of different types of protein sources (fish, beans and pulses, meat alternatives like Quorn, meat, chicken, eggs) for the children. Protein is made up of different building blocks called 'amino acids' and some of these amino acids can only be sourced from the food we eat – that's why it's really important to get a good mix of protein sources. This protein as part of children's meals in the day is important for their growth and repair of their bodies, and also contains key nutrients that are important to children's health (e.g. iron, omega 3s, calcium, vitamin D, and B vitamins).

Fish, served across the 3 week menu cycles, provides children with an important source of nutrients including protein, iron and omega 3 fatty acids.

Across our menus for young children, it's really important to us that we create these without the use of GM ingredients, artificial sweeteners or additives, which we have done.

We only offer fresh water and fresh milk as drink options throughout the day, avoiding sugary options, to help protect little teeth.