



PATIENT EDUCATION  
*Feeding Young Children*

MAYO CLINIC CHILDREN'S CENTER



BARBARA WOODWARD LIPS  
PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER



# Learning About Feeding Your Child

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An important part of your role as a caregiver is to provide good nutrition to your young child. Knowing about nutrition helps you with this challenge. When you know what your child needs for mental and physical growth, it can be a rewarding task.

This resource explains how to feed your young child and support your child's growth. It also includes ways to encourage your child to have healthy-eating habits. And it provides tips on how to handle challenging eating behaviors such as picky eating.

If you have questions after you read this resource, contact your child's dietitian or another member of your child's healthcare team.

# What You Can Do To Help Your Child Make Healthy Food Choices

With your help, your child can learn how to make healthy food choices now and later in life. Here are some ways to help.

## **Set a good example**

You are the most important influence in your child's life. You set a good example when your child sees you make time to plan and eat balanced meals and healthy snacks. But when you don't eat vegetables or skip meals, your child notices that too. Set the best example you can.

## **Schedule regular meals and snacks**

When children graze all day on food or drinks, they do not have the chance to get hungry. Being a little hungry is OK because it helps them listen to hunger and satiety cues. Satiety is the full feeling you have after you eat.

When children are hungry for a meal, they are more likely to try new foods. They may fuss less about what is served. Plan to serve three meals a day. Also plan a snack between each meal. Allow two hours between a meal and a snack.

## **Offer balanced meals**

The body needs food from different food groups to get all the needed nutrients each day. Food groups include protein, vegetables and fruits. They include dairy or dairy alternatives and grains. Dairy alternatives are plant-based foods that replace dairy milk, cheese and yogurt. Examples are oat milk and almond milk.

Plan to offer meals with 3 to 5 food groups. Offer snacks that include foods from 2 to 3 food groups. This can help your child get the nutrients needed for healthy mental and physical growth.

## **Offer variety**

Sometimes it is easier to offer the same few meals over and over. But it is important to offer a variety of foods. And it's important to prepare foods in different ways. This helps your child develop a taste for a variety of foods. It also teaches your child to accept new foods.

When your child eats different foods, they get more nutrients. Try to serve meals that have one food item your child is likely to eat along with a few new foods.

## **Be consistent**

One way to encourage your child to eat different types of foods is to offer them consistently. There is a higher chance that your child will like a food if exposed to it regularly. Even when your child does not like a food the first time, keep offering it. This sends the message that the food or food group is still an important part of a healthy diet.

## **Serve small portions**

When your child sees a large amount of food on the plate, it may be too much. They may feel pressured or anxious. Start with a small amount of food on the plate. Allow your child to ask for more.

## **Limit mealtime distractions**

Young children are easily distracted. Limit TV, toys and other electronics at mealtime. Eating around the table as a family builds relationships. And it encourages good eating habits. To focus attention on the meal, ask your child to describe the food. Ask what your child sees, feels and tastes.

## **Have fun**

Sometimes all it takes to get your child to eat better is to make food more interesting. For example, use cookie cutters to make bananas into stars. Add a food to the meal that is your child's favorite color. Or take the meal outside for a picnic. It is important to allow your child to enjoy mealtimes.

## **Talk positively about food**

To encourage good eating habits, use language that is supportive and positive. Avoid words such as "yucky," "gross" and "bad." Do not use punishment, bribes or rewards when it comes to eating. Use neutral or positive language to describe what the food is and what it can do for your child's body. Some examples are offered below.

Instead of saying ...	Try saying ...
If you love me, you'll eat that mango.	This is a mango. It is soft and sweet like melon. Want to try it with me?
You're such a big girl. You finished all your carrots.	Is your stomach full? Have you had enough carrots?
Eat your broccoli. It's healthy!	Broccoli has nutrients to help keep the heart strong. Isn't that cool?!
See? That didn't taste so bad.	Did you like it? What part did you like most? Everyone has different tastes.
You can't have any dessert until you try a bite of peas.	You can try the peas at another meal. Maybe next time I can cook them a different way.
Stop crying, and I'll give you some candy.	Can I give you a hug to help you feel better?

# Understand Your Child's Eating Behaviors

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Just as it is your role to provide healthy foods, your child's role is to eat the healthy foods provided. Your child chooses what to eat from what is offered. Your child chooses how much to eat or whether to eat at all.

Some behaviors related to food are common for kids. They usually are not a cause for concern. When you know about these behaviors, it can help take the stress and frustration away from mealtimes.

## Children between 1 and 2 years old

Typical behavior	Tips
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appetites decrease because children begin to grow more slowly.</li> <li>It may seem like children are not interested in food. This may last several months.</li> <li>Children may be cautious, curious or rebellious eaters.</li> <li>Children usually begin to explore foods with their fingers.</li> <li>Children often start to notice flavors and textures.</li> <li>Children may suddenly not like something they liked before.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide safe finger foods such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Small pieces of soft, cooked or canned fruit. Or chopped fruit bananas or peeled, ripe pears.</li> <li>Bite-sized pieces of cheese.</li> <li>O-shaped cereal.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Give whole milk or breast milk. This gives the right amount of fat that children <b>need</b> at this age.</li> <li>Offer small portions, so it does not seem like a lot of food to eat at one time.</li> <li>Limit juice to 4 fluid ounces a day, if you offer it at all.</li> </ul>

## Children 2 to 3 years old

Typical behavior	Tips
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children may eat only certain foods for a little while and then move to other foods.</li> <li>Appetites change often.</li> <li>Children may eat better than usual at one meal and refuse to eat at the next meal.</li> <li>A strong preference for certain foods begins to show.</li> <li>Children may struggle to eat by themselves.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allow and encourage your child to feed themselves.</li> <li>If your child refuses a food, stop offering it for 2 weeks. This gives your child a break from that food.</li> <li>Recognize that allowing children to feed themselves takes patience on your part.</li> <li>Give your child a choice. Your child can pick which plate to use. Or let your child choose between two options, such as broccoli or peas with pasta.</li> <li>Give low-fat or fat-free milk unless your child's healthcare professional tells you otherwise.</li> </ul>

## Children 4 to 6 years old

Typical behavior	Tips
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children may show more interest in playing than eating.</li> <li>• They may eat slowly or delay eating at mealtime.</li> <li>• Children may choose a limited variety of foods.</li> <li>• They may imitate you or follow your example of what to eat.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a variety of healthy choices.</li> <li>• Be consistent with your messages and what you expect.</li> <li>• Involve your child in tasks related to food, such as selecting a recipe, shopping and cooking.</li> <li>• See “Sample Menus and Snacks” to get some ideas.</li> </ul>

### It is OK if your child does not eat everything

At mealtimes, let your child choose how much to eat. It is OK for a child to leave food on the plate or even to refuse to eat sometimes. Your child gets needed nutrients over time. Your child does not need to get all the nutrients at every meal or snack.

### Offer choices to your child

When you offer choices, your child has some control. If your child has a say in what is offered, your child is more likely to eat it. Here are some ways to give your child a say at mealtimes:

- Offer a variety of foods at meals. Let your child choose what to eat.
- Allow your child to pick the plate or cup to use for the meal.
- Give your child a direct choice. For example, ask: “Would you like to have carrots or broccoli with your chicken nuggets?”

## **How your child talks and behaves around food matters**

Young children do not always know how to talk about food or hunger. They may use language that is not right for the situation because they don't know how to describe what they mean.

As a caregiver, you may need to play detective to figure out what your child is trying to tell you. Try to find a balance between respecting your child's needs and giving a consistent message about food. The suggestions that follow can help guide your responses in these situations.

Child's comment	Caregiver's response
I'm not hungry.	I'm glad you're listening to your body. You don't need to eat at this meal. But please come and sit with us while the rest of us eat. I want to hear about your day!
I don't like this chicken.	<p>You've eaten this before. Is there another reason you do not want to eat? Is your tummy still full from your snack?</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Trying new foods can be scary. I have other foods at the table you've had before. You can eat more of those foods if you're not ready to try the chicken.</p>
This is gross.	I'm sorry to hear you're not interested in eating this food. What is it you don't like about it? Does it smell or look different? Others do like this food. Let's respect them by not calling it gross.

# How To Handle Picky Eating

At times, picky eating can be hard to handle. Be as consistent as you can with mealtimes. Model good eating habits. Offer a variety of foods at meals. Encourage your child to choose from those foods.

- Do not give up if your child does not try foods the first few times.
- Flavor and taste often make people want to eat certain foods. People learn to like many of these flavors over time when they are exposed to them often.
- It is thought that children have more taste buds than adults. This means they may experience flavors differently.
- Food often needs to be introduced 15 to 20 times before a child accepts it.
- If your child is shy or hesitant about other activities, your child also may be reserved in trying new foods. Be patient and give your child time.
- Picky eating patterns are a part of typical development in children. They often go away on their own.

Nutrition is still important as you support your child's growth through a picky eating stage. Here are some ways to help increase the variety of food your child eats.

## Make meals simple

- Separate foods that often are mixed. One example of a mixed food is spaghetti. You may love all your food mixed. But this could be too much for a child. Offer plain noodles. Offer sauce and cheese on the side. This allows your child either to mix the foods or to eat each food separately.
- Another idea is to let your child build a taco or make a casserole. Prepare sauces, starches, proteins and dairy products. Keep them separate. Then let your child mix and stir foods to create a dish.

## Offer foods like those your child already enjoys

Think about foods your child already likes. Offer other foods with textures and flavors like those foods.

If a child likes ...	Offer ...	Offer ...
Strawberry yogurt	Cherry yogurt	Cherry smoothie
Tortilla chips	Black bean chips	Black bean quesadilla
Plain crackers	Crackers and cheese	Grilled cheese sandwich
Chicken nuggets	Grilled chicken strips	Grilled chicken sandwich
Rice	Quinoa and rice mix	Quinoa
Fast-food fries	Homemade fries	Breaded or baked zucchini or avocado fries

## Offer new foods on a separate plate

- At mealtimes, offer new foods on a separate plate. Each family member may have a plate. Or place the new food on a larger serving plate.
- When everyone is involved in trying new foods, a child sees a team effort to try new foods. It's OK to ask an older sibling to model this behavior.
- Talk about what the new food smells, looks and tastes like.
- At some point during the meal, have everyone try the new food and rate it.
  - Thumbs-up means "I like it."
  - Thumbs-down means "I do not like it today."
  - Thumbs sideways means "I am not sure."

## Make eating fun

- Let your child help you plan and cook meals.
- Create fun shapes with food. Use cookie cutters in different shapes.
- Use chopsticks to eat.
- Use dipping sauces to add flavor to food.

## Extreme picky eating

Picky eating patterns are part of typical development in children. But extreme picky eating can affect health and well-being. Watch for signs that this may be happening. They include the following:

- Your child does not eat any food from one or more food groups.
- Your child loses weight or does not gain enough weight.
- Family relationships are strained by struggles about what your child does and does not eat.

If you see any of these signs and are concerned, contact a member of your child's care team.

# Nutrient Needs and Portion Sizes for Young Children

The following suggestions reflect the needs of most young children. To learn about your child's exact portion size and nutrient needs, talk to a registered dietitian.

## Grains

The number of servings of grains children need each day depends on their age.

- 12 to 23 months of age: 1 3/4 to 3 ounces.
- 2 to 3 years of age: 3 to 5 ounces.
- 4 to 5 years of age: 4 to 6 ounces.

Examples of grains	Examples of 1 ounce of grains
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Whole-grain pasta or brown rice</li><li>• Whole-wheat bread, corn or flour tortillas, graham crackers, and whole-wheat crackers</li><li>• Whole-grain, ready-to-eat cereal</li><li>• Oats, oat-based granola or bars</li><li>• Bulgur or barley</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1 slice of bread</li><li>• 6-inch tortilla</li><li>• 1/2 cup cooked pasta, rice or cereal</li><li>• 1 cup ready-to-eat cereal</li><li>• 1/2 cup prepared oatmeal</li><li>• 5 whole-wheat crackers</li></ul>

## Protein

The number of servings of protein children need each day depends on their age.

- 12 to 23 months of age: 2 ounces.
- 2 to 3 years of age: 2 to 4 ounces.
- 4 to 5 years of age: 2 to 4 ounces.

Examples of protein	Examples of 1 ounce of protein
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beef, pork, lamb, goat, venison and poultry, such as turkey or chicken</li> <li>• Fish and shellfish</li> <li>• Eggs</li> <li>• Chopped or ground nuts and seeds</li> <li>• Nut and seed butters</li> <li>• Mashed or soft-cooked soybeans, lentils, dried peas, and beans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 ounce of cooked meat: chicken, turkey, beef, pork, fish</li> <li>• 1 tablespoon nut butter</li> <li>• 2 tablespoons nuts or seeds</li> <li>• 2 tablespoons hummus</li> <li>• 1 egg</li> <li>• 1/4 cup cooked beans or peas</li> <li>• 1/4 cup tofu</li> </ul>

## Dairy

The number of servings of dairy children need each day depends on their age.

- 12 to 23 months of age: 1 2/3 to 2 cups.
- 2 to 3 years of age: 2 to 2 1/2 cups.
- 4 to 5 years of age: 3 cups.

Examples of dairy	Examples of 1 cup of dairy and dairy alternatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breast milk</li> <li>• Plain, pasteurized whole milk for toddlers 12 to 23 months of age</li> <li>• Low-fat milk for children over 2 years old</li> <li>• Reconstituted powdered milk</li> <li>• Whole-fat or low-fat yogurt</li> <li>• Regular-fat or low-fat cheese</li> <li>• Fortified soy milk</li> <li>• Fortified plant-based milk products</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup milk or fortified nondairy milk</li> <li>• 1 cup yogurt</li> <li>• 1 1/4 cup cottage cheese</li> <li>• 1 1/2 ounces cheese</li> </ul>

## Vegetables

The number of servings of vegetables children need each day depends on their age.

- 12 to 23 months of age: 2/3 to 1 cup.
- 2 to 3 years of age: 1 to 1 1/2 cups.
- 4 to 5 years of age: 2 cups.

Examples of vegetables	Examples of 1 cup of vegetables
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All fresh, frozen and canned vegetables</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup raw vegetables</li> <li>• 1/2 cup cooked vegetables</li> <li>• 2 cups leafy salad greens</li> <li>• 1 cup 100% vegetable juice</li> </ul>

## Fruits

The number of servings of fruit children need each day depends on their age.

- 12 to 23 months of age: 1/2 to 1 cup.
- 2 to 3 years of age: 1 to 1 1/2 cups.
- 4 to 5 years of age: 2 cups.

Examples of fruit	Examples of 1 cup of fruit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All fresh, frozen, pureed and canned fruit</li> <li>• Whole-fruit smoothies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup fresh, frozen, canned or cooked fruit</li> <li>• 1 piece of fruit, such as a small apple</li> <li>• 1/2 cup dried fruit</li> </ul>

## Fats and oils

The number of servings of fats and oils children need each day depends on their age.

- 12 to 23 months of age: 2 teaspoons.
- 2 to 3 years of age: 3 teaspoons.
- 4 to 5 years of age: 3 teaspoons.

Examples of fats and oils	Examples of 1 teaspoon of fats and oils
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heart-healthy vegetable oil, such as olive oil</li> <li>• Fats from olives, avocados, nuts, seeds and fatty fish</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 teaspoon oil</li> <li>• 2 teaspoons salad dressing</li> </ul>

## Important nutrients for children

All nutrients are important. But children may not get enough of certain nutrients.

### Calcium

Calcium is a mineral that helps build strong bones as a child grows. Typically, 2 to 3 servings of dairy a day are enough to meet a child's needs.

Foods other than dairy also have calcium. These include broccoli, fortified orange juice and dairy alternatives fortified with calcium, such as almond milk. Other foods that have calcium include anchovies and sardines. Beans, nuts, seeds and leafy green vegetables also have calcium.

## **Vitamin D**

Vitamin D helps build strong bones. It helps the body absorb calcium. Vitamin D is made in the skin from regular exposure to sunlight. And it can be found in milk and yogurt fortified with vitamin D. Children need at least 600 international units of vitamin D a day.

It can be hard to get enough vitamin D from food alone. Talk to your child's dietitian or a member of the care team if you are concerned about vitamin D. You may be advised to give your child a multivitamin that contains vitamin D.

## **Iron**

Iron is an important mineral that your child needs. It carries oxygen to different parts of the body, including the brain. Drinking large amounts of milk can lead to low levels of iron. This condition is called iron deficiency. Limit dairy to 3 cups a day.

Provide foods high in iron such as fortified breakfast cereal, lentils and beef. Foods considered high in iron have 2 milligrams (mg) of iron or more per serving. Chicken, eggs and soy milk have 0 to 1 mg per serving.

## **Vitamins A and C**

These nutrients play an important role in healthy development such as iron absorption and immune function. The best way to get these vitamins is to eat a variety of fruits and vegetables each day. Examples include oranges, strawberries, melons and peaches. They also include broccoli, tomatoes, carrots, squash and sweet potatoes.

## Fiber

You can figure out how much fiber your child needs.

Take your child's age in years and add 10 to 15 grams. For example, for a child who is 5 years old, add 10 and 15 to the age. That gives you the range of fiber a child needs. This child needs about 15 to 20 grams of fiber each day.

Dietary fiber helps food move through the body. It increases the weight and size of stool. And it softens stool. A bulky stool is easier to pass. This lessens the chance of constipation.

Constipation means trouble passing stool. When children do not eat enough fiber, they can become constipated. They also may have a poor appetite and not grow well. Many foods children typically like to eat are low in fiber.

To increase fiber, be sure your child's meals include whole grains, fruits and vegetables each day. Examples of whole grains include oatmeal and whole-grain cereals and breads. Some fruits you can offer include pears, bananas and strawberries. Good vegetable options include peas, broccoli and carrots.

# Prevent Choking in Children Under Age 4

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Children under age 4 are at greater risk of choking on solid foods. Young children may have the teeth needed to bite off a piece of food. But they may not be able to grind it into pieces small enough to swallow safely.

Also, young children can be distracted easily. Sometimes they do not think about chewing and swallowing. The foods listed below can get stuck in the throat and cause your child to choke.

**To help prevent choking, do not give these foods to children under age 4:**

- Chewing gum.
- Fresh, raw vegetables.
- Marshmallows.
- Rice cakes.
- Dried fruits.
- Hard, gel and sticky candy or snacks.
- Nuts, peanuts and seeds.
- Popcorn.

When you prepare the following foods in the right way, you can serve them to your young child.

- **Peanut butter and cheese spreads.** Spread a **thin layer** on bread or a cracker. Do not serve spoonfuls, chunks or heavy layers of these foods.
- **Hot dogs.** Cut hot dogs lengthwise into 4 sections and then into smaller pieces. Do not give your child whole hot dogs, chunks of hot dogs or hot dogs in the shape of coins.
- **Round and cubed foods.** Completely chop round and cubed foods such as grapes, pieces of cheese, fresh fruit and meat. Do not serve round or cubed foods without chopping them first.

If you are not sure whether a food is safe to give to your child, ask a member of your child's care team.

# Sample Menus and Snacks for Young Children

Use the following sample menus and snack ideas to help plan healthy meals and snacks for your child.

## Sample menu 1

### Breakfast

Milk	1/2 cup
Cereal made with whole grains	1/4 to 1/2 cup
Banana	1 small

### Snack

Yogurt	1/2 cup
Apple slices	1 small apple

### Lunch

Milk	1/2 cup
Spaghetti with meat sauce	1/4 to 1/2 cup noodles with 2 to 5 tablespoons meat sauce
Cooked carrots	1/2 to 1 cup
Margarine or butter	1 to 2 teaspoons
Pear slices	1/2 to 1 cup canned or fresh

**Snack**

Hard cheddar cheese	1 slice
Orange slices	1 small orange

**Dinner**

Milk	1/2 cup
Baked chicken	1 to 2 ounces
Brown rice	1/2 cup cooked
Margarine or butter	1 teaspoon
Green beans	1/2 to 1 cup

**Sample menu 2****Breakfast**

Yogurt	1/2 cup
Oatmeal	1/4 to 1/2 cup
Banana	1 small banana

**Snack**

Humus	2 tablespoons
Whole-grain crackers	4 to 8 crackers

**Lunch**

Milk	1/2 cup
Macaroni and cheese	1/4 to 1/2 cup
Tuna	1/4 to 1/2 cup
Cooked broccoli	1/2 to 1 cup
Orange	1/2 of 1 small orange

## Snack

Peanut butter	1 tablespoon
Apple slices	1 small apple

## Dinner

Milk	1/2 cup
Egg	1
Brown rice	1/4 to 1/2 cup
Peas and diced carrots, cooked	1/2 cup
Olive oil	1 teaspoon

## Snack ideas

Be aware that some foods on this snack list may not be safe for children under 4. Be sure to read “Prevent Choking in Children Under Age 4” to learn how to prevent choking.

### Fruit and vegetable snacks

- Canned fruit in fruit juice
- Applesauce
- Raisins and other dried fruit
- Fresh fruits and vegetables

### Dairy snacks

- Cheese and cheese sticks
- Cottage cheese
- Milk
- Low-fat yogurt and pudding

## **Grain snacks**

- Unsweetened, whole-grain cereals
- Whole-grain or graham crackers
- Low-fat muffins and bagels
- Pretzels and low-fat popcorn

## **Protein snacks**

- Nuts and peanuts
- Peanut butter
- Deli meat

# Final Thoughts About Feeding Young Children

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When you learn how to feed your young child, you'll know how to feed them healthy foods. You also can teach them to make healthy food choices. This can help support their growth and teach them healthy-eating habits for life.

## **Key points to remember**

- Set a good example. Have good eating habits yourself.
- Provide a wide variety of healthy foods.
- Schedule regular meals and snacks.
- Be aware that some foods may cause young children to choke.
- Use the "Nutrient Needs and Portion Sizes for Young Children" and the "Sample Menus and Snacks for Young Children" information in this resource to help you plan healthy meals and snacks.

## **Encourage your child to get regular physical activity**

Physical activity is another healthy habit you can teach your child. Encourage your child to be physically active for 60 minutes or more each day. Physical activity includes anything that gets your child moving. Examples include active play and being part of family fun, such as hiking and swimming.

Set a good example for your child. Be physically active yourself. Plan activities you can do together as a family. Consider outdoor activities that your child is old enough to do.

For children who can walk, play a game of tag in the yard or go for a walk. Dance together to children's music. Or play "Follow the Leader" indoors. Make it fun to be active.

Learning to eat well and be active benefits your child for a lifetime.

# Notes

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# Notes

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This information is for your education only. It does not replace medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. New medical research or practices may change this information. If you have questions about a medical condition, talk with a member of your healthcare team.

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#### BARBARA WOODWARD LIPS PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER

Mrs. Lips, a resident of San Antonio, Texas, was a loyal Mayo Clinic patient of more than 40 years and a self-made business leader who significantly expanded her family's activities in oil, gas and ranching. Upon her death in 1995, Mrs. Lips paid the ultimate compliment by leaving her entire estate to Mayo Clinic. By naming the Barbara Woodward Lips Patient Education Center, Mayo honors her generosity, her love of learning, her belief in patient empowerment and her dedication to high-quality care.

**MAYO CLINIC** | 200 First Street SW | Rochester, MN 55905 | [mayoclinic.org](http://mayoclinic.org)

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