



Nutritional advice for fussy eaters

Children under 5 years of age

Information for parents and carers

Department of Nutrition and Dietetics

Royal Hospital for Children and Young People, Edinburgh

Practical feeding strategies

Many children go through phases of refusing to eat certain foods or even at times refusing to eat anything at all. This is more common in young children when they are trying to show their independence but can happen at any age.

Although it may be worrying for parents, children will not harm themselves if they don't eat enough for a while.

Some children go through a phase of only eating a very limited number of foods. There are strategies to help increase the variety of acceptable foods, but it can take a period of months or years to achieve this, so patience is needed.

Golden rules

- As a parent you should decide on what, when and where foods are offered
- It is up to your child to decide whether they are hungry or not and how much they want to eat
- Praise your child when they eat
- Don't become anxious or "fuss" or argue with your child around mealtimes
- Remember that in the long-run, the biggest influence on what a child eats is usually what their parents eat, so provide a good example by eating a balanced diet with a wide variety of foods including fruit and vegetables

Environment

- Remove all distractions such as the television, phones, video games and toys
- Eat together as a family
- Sit down at a table to eat
- Seat your child so that they are well supported and within easy reach of their plates/cups/utensils
- Create a happy, relaxed atmosphere.

Choice

- In general, offer the same foods as the family eats – don't prepare separate "special" meals
- Continue to offer small amounts of foods (on separate occasions) that have been previously refused. It may take many exposures for a child to accept new foods
- Don't assume a child will dislike a particular food
- Offer a new food alongside a familiar (liked) food
- If your child refuses the food, do not offer alternatives.

Mealtimes

- If your child is not eating well, offer small amounts- too much food can overwhelm your child. Praise your child when the food is eaten and gradually increase the amounts offered
- Encourage self-feeding, even if it is messy. Table manners can develop later
- Expect, allow and prepare for mess- place splash mats on the floor. Clean up calmly at the end.
- Wipe your child's sticky hands and face after the meal.
- If your child is very young and you are still helping with feeding, be aware of cues and signs- stop if your child is turning their head away or clamping their mouth shut.

Timing

- Offer 3 meals per day with one planned snack between meals
- Do not allow your child to graze on lots of snacks through the day
- Limit mealtimes to 20–30 minutes per meal
- Don't rush your child to finish eating
- Don't force your child to eat. Calmly remove any food which has not been eaten after 30 minutes.

If your child doesn't want to drink milk

Milk is a good source of calcium and protein.

If your child doesn't want to drink milk, there are other foods which can provide these nutrients.

Examples:

- Cheese (both hard cheese such as cheddar and soft cheeses such as cottage, cream or ricotta cheese)
- Yoghurt or fromage frais
- Custard/rice/semolina pudding
- Fruit smoothies
- Calcium fortified soya milk, soya yoghurt or soya cheese

Milk and cheese can also be used in meals:

- Add milk, grated cheese, ricotta cheese or cream cheese to mashed vegetables, puddings/desserts, soups and/or egg dishes (for example, scrambled eggs/frittatas/omelettes)
- Serve vegetables sometimes with white/cheese sauce and/or grated cheese on top
- Serve pasta with cream sauces and/or grated cheese on top

Some children will take milk as hot chocolate or a milk shake. Be aware of the sugar content in these drinks - limit them to mealtimes and ensure your child has a good teeth brushing routine.

If your child doesn't want to eat meat

Meat is a good source of protein and red meat is an important source of iron.

If your child doesn't want to eat meat, talk to them about why this is. If your child is not keen on the texture of some meats or doesn't like chewing meat very much, you can try the following:

- Blend meat into soups
- Try minced meat dishes such as pasta bolognese, nachos with meat sauce, lasagne, cannelloni, shepherd's/cottage pie
- Try wafer thin sliced cold meats, such as chicken, roast beef, pork and ham
- Try burgers, meatballs, meatloaf, filled pasta, pancake/crepe, rolls or dumplings with meat filling.

If your child does not eat any red meat, it is important to think about alternative sources of iron.

Good non-meat sources of iron are:

- Pulses, such as beans (including baked beans), lentils, chickpeas
- Green leafy vegetables such as broccoli, dark green cabbage (kale) and peas
- Dried fruit such as apricots, raisins and figs
- Chopped nuts such as almonds and brazil nuts
- Egg yolks
- Bread (especially wholemeal)
- Potatoes, especially with the skin on
- Some breakfast cereals are fortified with extra iron- check the labels to see which are fortified.

If your child does not want to eat meat at all, other good sources of protein are milk and dairy foods, fish, eggs and beans.

Some examples to try are:

- Bean/nut spreads and dips (for example, peanut butter, tahini, hummus, dahl)
- Quorn[™] or tofu (for example patties, deep fried cubes, smooth pâté)
- Baked beans on toast or with potatoes
- Bean or lentil chilli
- Egg omelette or frittata.

If your child doesn't want to eat fruit

Fruit is an important source of vitamins, minerals and fibre.

It is important to encourage your child to keep trying different fruits occasionally. Children may be more open to having a bite of a fruit if it is cut up into small pieces and peeled. Once your child gets used to eating these pieces, you can gradually increase the amount offered.

Some children are more willing to try soft fruits such as banana, papaya, mango, kiwi fruit or tinned fruit such as peaches, apricots and plums.

Some children will manage a small amount of chopped up fruit or tinned fruit when it is served with ice cream, yoghurt or custard. Once they start to enjoy this more, you can gradually move onto plain fruit.

Other suggestions:

- Try mixing pureed or chopped fruit into porridge, Weetabix or other cereals
- Add fruit to pancake, cake or muffin mixtures
- Try fruit smoothies and fruit ice lollies
- Add fruit to jelly
- Try frozen fruit yoghurt
- Try fruit with savoury foods, for example: pear/apple/pineapple/grapes with meats or as a pizza topping
- Add to sandwich filling, for example, mashed banana and ricotta cheese.

If your child doesn't want to eat vegetables:

Vegetables are important sources of vitamins, minerals and fibre.

It is important to encourage your child to keep trying different vegetables occasionally. Some children will agree to have one vegetable piece on their plate. Once they have got used to this, they can become more receptive to trying one bite. A very gentle approach is needed.

Some children will accept raw vegetables such as chopped carrot, tomato and cucumber. Continue encouraging these foods.

Once your child is established eating a vegetable (for example, sliced carrot) it is helpful after a period of time to try offering the vegetable presented in a different way (for example, in a different shape). This is helpful in the transition to being more receptive to different foods.

Other suggestions:

- Grate or dice carrots/courgettes/onions and add to meatballs/burgers, casseroles, stews, risotto, pasta, sauces, pizzas, blend sweetcorn into pancake mixtures, add meat and vegetables to omelettes
- Puree vegetables and add to soups
- Serve as a thick sauce or salsa to accompany dry, cooked meat pieces
- Choose vegetable fillings for ravioli pasta, dumplings or spring rolls, frozen vegetable fingers (fish finger-style)
- Offer raw vegetable sticks with a dip your child likes
- Baked sweet potato wedges with dip.

Extra information

- Try not to use favourite foods as a reward to encourage children to eat foods they do not like. Foods used in this way simply become more valued. Instead reward your child for trying a new food with non-food items such as stickers.
- It is important that your child has the right amount of drinks over the day. Children who don't drink enough can develop constipation which can reduce their appetite. However, too many drinks can fill your child up, which can also reduce their appetite at mealtimes. Young children can sometimes seem to want drinks when they are hungry, so watch out for this. Frequently offer drinks from a cup, after food, instead of immediately before or with meals.
- Involve your child in food shopping and food preparation to spark interest in food. Occasionally change the eating environment, for example, by inviting friends round or having a picnic.

Vitamin supplements

- Children aged 1 to 4 years old should be given a **daily supplement containing 10 micrograms of vitamin D** throughout the year. Currently children up to 3 years of age will be offered free vitamin D drops. These drops will be provided by your health visitor or family nurse at routine appointments. Vitamin D supplements for older children can be bought at most pharmacies and supermarkets.
- If your child is eating a very restricted diet with a small number of foods, speak to your GP about additional vitamin and mineral supplements.

Poor weight gain and growth

If you have concerns about your child's weight gain and growth, discuss this with your health visitor or GP.