

Help, My Child Won't Eat!

Dietary advice for children who aren't eating well



Help, my child won't eat!

Many children go through phases of refusing to eat certain foods or at times refusing to eat anything at all.

This is a normal stage in young children as they become wary of new foods. They need time to learn to like them. Food refusal is often a way of showing independence and is a normal part of growing up.

Although it is very worrying, children will not harm themselves if they don't eat enough for a short while. They may need less to eat than you think.



It may help to discuss the problem with other parents who have already gone through the same situation with their child.

If the problem shows no sign of improving, or if you are worried about your child's weight and growth, you can contact your health professional (Health Visitor, School Nurse, GP or Dietitian) for further advice.



Make meals enjoyable, social occasions

Offer regular meals and snacks, as this is better than letting your child 'pick' through the whole day. Young children need 3 meals and 2-3 nutritious snacks. Always offer 2 courses at lunchtime and evening meal – one savoury and one dessert.

Allow enough time for your child to eat, but do not let meals drag on for too long (20-30 minutes is about right)

Sit together at the table

Present food in fun and appealing ways to your child

Eat with your child whenever possible, as they will learn from you

Try and eat in a calm, relaxed area, without the television or toys as children are easily distracted

Use brightly coloured plates and cups



Managing meal times and new foods

It is a good idea to offer at least one thing you know your child will eat at each meal

Do not take food away and offer a completely different meal if the first one is refused

Offer small portions of food at mealtimes – if these are finished, praise your child and offer more

Remember, new foods may need to be offered several times before children will try them



Keep offering your child new foods, even if they refuse them at first.

It can take as many as 10-15 attempts before they will accept a new food. It is important not to leave more than a couple of days between each try, so you may need to offer a new food several times over a short period before they will eat it.

Eating new foods together with your child will encourage them to try new foods.

How can I help?

Try to set boundaries around meal times and be clear with your child about what behaviour is acceptable. Praise them when they do this. Aim to encourage your child to at least have a small amount on their lips and tongue or a bite-sized mouthful. It is important that you don't constantly give in to your child's food avoidance, otherwise they may never try new foods.

However never force a child to eat.

Your child is telling you they have had enough when they:

- turn their head away
- push the bowl or plate away or onto the floor
- scream or shout
- spit food out repeatedly

Although it is a very difficult thing to do, try not to show that you are worried or annoyed by your child not eating. If they do eat, show them you are pleased, for example smile and say "good boy/girl, well done".

If they stop eating at a meal, try once to encourage them to eat a little more. If they don't want anymore, take the food away without any comment.



It is a good idea for children to use their fingers to play with food. Encourage messy food play. This doesn't have to be at mealtimes. In fact it can sometimes be more relaxed and fun if the food play is not during mealtimes. Do not worry if they make a mess!

Cooking with your child helps them to learn about food. They are also more likely to eat foods they have helped to prepare. Simple food preparation could involve making a sandwich, spreading, measuring out ingredients and chopping up fruits.

When your child eats well, offer a reward such as stickers, magazines, taking them to the park or spending some special time playing together.



Try a variety of foods for a well balanced diet

Milk and dairy foods

Aim for 3 servings a day. These can be milk, cheese, yoghurts, fromage frais, custard and other milk puddings.

Children under two years should only be offered full-fat dairy products.

Low-fat versions such as semi-skimmed milk can be introduced to children over the age of two, when they are eating well.

Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy protein

Offer 2-3 servings a day.

Foods in this group include all types of meat and fish, chick peas, kidney beans, lentils, hummus, dhal, eggs, nuts and baked beans.

Many children enjoy minced meat, sausages, chicken, fish fingers and fish in sauces.

Try to include oily fish such as salmon, mackerel or sardines, once or twice a week.

Avoid whole nuts, including peanuts, in children under the age of five as they may cause choking.

Fats and oils

Growing children need some butter or margarine and oil. Adding oils, butter and cream is a good way to increase energy intake if required.

When using fats and oils, choose ones with a high content of omega-3 fats, for example olive oil, walnut oil and rapeseed oil.



Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods

Offer these foods at each meal.

Foods from this group include breakfast cereal, bread, potato, chapatti, yam and green bananas, pasta, rice and couscous.

Fruit and vegetables

Offer fruit and vegetables with each meal every day.

Encourage 5 portions each day. Try raw and cooked vegetables, and fruit which can be raw, cooked, dried or canned in juice.

For example add fruit to natural yoghurt, offer diluted pure fruit juice with meals and try a snack of vegetable sticks with hummus.

