

Department of Nutrition & Dietetics

Advice for children with a significantly limited diet

This leaflet is for parents and carers of children who have a significantly limited diet. If there are concerns regarding poor growth, or limited intake, ask your GP to refer your child to a Dietitian.

Try not to get anxious about mealtimes. This might make the problem worse, particularly if you are expecting your child to eat more than they need. Pretend that you do not mind that they are not eating, even if you do.

If allowed to do so, your child will take in just enough calories for their own needs. So you should always respect your child's decision that they have had enough to eat, even if they lose a little weight initially.

You will probably experience bad days, when your child refuses foods they usually like, don't show your child that you are worried. Don't think about what your child eats at a single meal, or in a single day. Instead, think about what your child eats over a week.

Your child needs time to learn that unfamiliar foods are safe and enjoyable to eat. They will gain confidence by watching you and others eat.

Try these tips for making mealtimes run smoothly:

- **Eat as a family when you can;** your child needs to see you eating.
- **Stay positive,** don't have battles.



Patient Information

- **Make mealtimes relaxed and enjoyable** try to have a regular family mealtime and sit at the table together. If your child says they do not want to eat tell them it is OK but insist that they stay at the table while everybody else eats. If it is difficult for your child to sit or they are fearful of sitting at the table introduce a large egg timer and just insist on a few minutes initially then gradually build on the duration.
- **Eat away from distractions** such as the TV, pets, games and toys. Distractions will make it more difficult for your child to concentrate on eating. Try to make mealtimes a happy occasion and chat about things other than eating.
- **Offer finger foods as often as possible:** allow your child to touch their food, play with it if they want to, and make a mess at mealtimes. Children enjoy having the control of feeding themselves with finger foods.
- **Make mealtimes consistent:** work out a daily routine of three meals and two or three snacks that fit round your child's routine. Children thrive on routine and knowing what to expect.

Limit mealtimes to 20 minutes and accept that after this, your child is unlikely to eat much more. Don't sit at the table trying to persuade your child to eat more. Wait for the next snack or meal and offer some nutritious foods then. Most children eat whatever they are going to eat within the first 20 minutes.

After 20 minutes, take the food away without comment and then offer pudding, whether your child has eaten or not. Remember all food is good food.

Ask everyone in the family, and anyone else who feeds your child, such as nursery staff or your child minder, to follow your approach and routine.

Keep your child interested

Never bribe your child to eat the savoury course with the promise of the sweet course. This will only make them want the savoury course less. The pudding is a part of the meal and provides useful calories too.

Patient Information

Give small portions. Children can be overwhelmed by big platefuls and lose their appetite. If your child finishes their small portion, offer them more.

Involve your child

Involve children in food shopping by letting them help you to find things in the supermarket. Your child can also help you to set the table. This will encourage a positive attitude to food and mealtimes.

Your child could also help with simple cooking and food preparation. Let your child handle and touch new foods without being under pressure to eat them. They may then be more likely to try the food.

Don't force your child to eat

If they are doing any of the following they do not want to eat:

- Keeping their mouth shut when offered food
- Saying "no"
- Turning their head away from the food being offered
- Pushing away a spoon, bowl or plate containing food
- Holding food in their mouth and refusing to swallow it
- Spitting food out repeatedly
- Leaning out of their highchair or trying to climb out
- Crying, shouting or screaming
- Gagging or retching

It's easy to fall into traps that can increase the tension at mealtimes. So here are the pitfalls to watch out for:

Don't coax, bribe or plead with your child to eat. A little gentle encouragement is fine, but never insist that they eat. Don't start to spoon feed them, or force a spoonful into their mouth. This can make them anxious and frightened about food.

Patient Information

Don't take away a refused meal and offer a different one in its place.

Your child will soon take advantage if you do! In the long run, it is always better to offer family meals and accept that your child will prefer some foods to others. Always try to include in each meal one food that you know they will eat.

Don't offer large drinks of milk or juice an hour before a meal. Large drinks will reduce your child's appetite. If they are thirsty, give them a drink of water instead.

Keep fruit juices to mealtimes only as they are linked with tooth decay. Make sure they are well diluted (one part juice to 10 parts water).

Make sure your child is not drinking too much milk during the day.

Large quantities of milk can spoil their appetite. Your child needs between 350ml and 500ml (two thirds of a pint to a pint) of milk a day.

Try to phase out bottles so that all your child's drinks, including milk, are given in cups or beakers.

Allow your child to play with food and do not worry if they make a mess. Do not rush to wipe their face and hands if they make a mess.

Don't offer snacks just before a meal. If your child has not eaten well at their main meal, don't offer them a snack straight afterwards. It's tempting to give your child a snack, just to make sure they have actually eaten something. However, it is best to stick to a set meal pattern. Wait until the next snack or meal before offering food again.

Don't assume that because your child has refused a food he will never eat it again. Tastes change with time. Some children need to be offered a new food at least 15 times before they feel confident to try it.

Take the emotion out of mealtimes. Don't tell your child off if they don't eat or praise them if they do just make it the usual thing that everybody does. You can praise your child for having stayed at the table.

Patient Information

Don't feel guilty if one meal turns into a disaster. Put it behind you and approach the next meal positively. You and your child are both on a learning curve. Your child is learning to try new flavours and textures, and you are learning to cope with tricky mealtimes.

For further information please contact the Nutrition and Dietetics team on 024 7696 6155.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 6155 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

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To give feedback on this leaflet please email feedback@uhcw.nhs.uk

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