

Dietetics

Feeding advice for children with autism who have restricted eating

Restricted eating is common in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The level of restriction often goes beyond picky or fussy eating. This leaflet will suggest ways of tackling your child's restricted eating.

Getting the basics right

These suggestions are important. Getting these basics right will support your child to improve their eating. Children are **not** likely to improve their eating without these basics in place:

- Never force the child to eat – this always makes the problem worse.
- Keep calm - pretend you do not mind them not eating even if you do.
- If the child never sits with you to eat, show them that you have a pleasant and relaxed time eating. Gentle encouragement to get them to join you, even for a short time, is progress. There should be no expectation of the child eating if they don't normally.
- If the child sits with you but is a slow eater, do not let the first course take over 20 minutes.
- Offer pudding even if the first course is not touched. All food is good food.
- Do not comment on any uneaten food.
- Try to eat in a relaxed environment. Avoid having the TV, radio or music on at meal times.
- Offer food regularly – this should be about every two hours. You should provide three meals each day and snacks between meals.



Nutrition

We recommend that your child has a multivitamin and mineral preparation. There are a variety of different flavours and types (liquid and chewy types). Choose one that you think your child may like.

Constipation and reflux

These problems are more common in children with autism and treating them will often help. If you think that the child may have these problems ask your GP, consultant or dietitian for advice.

When the basics described above are in place, decide on one of the following sections to work on.

Increasing the range of foods that your child will eat

Children with autism are often most comfortable eating a specific food. If you always provide this, they are likely to reduce the number of foods they eat.

It is important that you continue to give your child foods that are slightly different and not always an exact match to their preferred food. This prevents further restriction of foods that they will eat and will help improve the range of foods that they will eat.

Example 1 - Jack likes a particular large, medium cut, sliced white bread. The following slight variations were suggested. Jack tried the item most acceptable to him first. After the first item, Jack went on to try the others from this list.

- Small loaf, same bread
- Same brand but thick or thin sliced
- Unsliced bread
- Pitta bread
- Ciabatta
- Pizza bases
- Rolls
- ½ and ½ white and wholemeal
- French sticks

Example 2 - Amy will only eat first stage stewed apple and custard from a baby jar. She is 5 years old. The following variations were suggested:

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- The same flavour, but a different brand was tried
- Then a powder version was tasted
- Next, a tiny amount of apple sauce (the tip of a teaspoon) was added into the pudding.
- Finally a tiny amount of custard or yoghurt was added to the pudding

To encourage your child to eat a new food

1. If your child loves a specific food, let your child know that you expect them to eat a tiny amount of a new food first. Do this at every meal, with the same new food and the same tiny amount. Once your child is doing this regularly, increase the amount of the new food. This can be increased again once the child accepts the new amount at each meal.

- The starting point can be smelling the food regularly
- Then try touching the food with their finger and smelling
- Then try putting their finger to their lips after touching the food
- Then try putting a spoon into their mouth with the same food on it
- Continue in small steps

2. If the child loves a particular food of a suitable texture, tell your child that you are mixing in a tiny amount of a new food. This can be done to the whole meal or a small portion of meal can be taken out to have the new food added. This portion must be eaten first. Slowly increase the amount of new food added each time. This can even be a savoury food added to a sweet food. Eventually the child will be eating the new food.

Recognise what textures and types of food your child is eating

List the foods that your child will eat, and then describe each of the textures and colours:

- Are they crunchy, soft, dry, wet or sloppy?
- Do you notice white, beige or any orange colours etc?
- Do they eat different textures, but separately? For example, they will eat crunchy cereal and drink milk, but not together.

When you have this information, try to provide your child with similar foods.

Patient Information

For children who need to increase their weight

- Having sufficient energy for growth is more important than healthy eating when children are underweight.
- It is important to give your child the food that they will eat regularly. This sometimes means your child will only eat one food type for days at a time. This will mean that they will need to eat the food at break times at school.
- Poor food intake and poor weight gain is often the cause of parental anxiety. Your child may sense your anxiety which can make their eating worse. Try to stay calm and work through the suggestions in this leaflet.
- If you are able to add extra foods such as butter or sugar to your child's diet, look at the Information sheet "How to gain weight in children". Please ask our department for this information.
- If you need further information and advice please ask your GP for a referral to the Dietetic Department.

Useful Information

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/eating/all-audiences>

www.bda.uk.com/resource/autism-diet.html

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 6161 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

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