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

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.
Dietary Advice For Children Who Aren't Eating Well

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.
Dietary Advice For Children Who Aren’t Eating Well

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.

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.

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.
Meal suggestions

**Breakfast**
- Small bowl of breakfast cereal with milk
- Toast, pancakes or crumpets with butter or margarine and jam, honey or peanut butter
- Beans on toast
- Eggs – boiled, poached or scrambled

**Light meal**
- Bite-sized sandwich cut into shapes with different fillings, for example ham and tomato, cheese and cucumber
- Toast with peanut butter, eggs, baked beans or cheese
- Small jacket potato and filling
- Toasted sandwiches
- Crackers and cheese or ham

**Main meal**
- Pasta dishes, eg macaroni cheese, spaghetti Bolognese
- Curry with rice or chapatti
- Fish in white, cheese or parsley sauce
- Roast meat or mince, eg shepherd’s pie
- Fish fingers or chicken nuggets

Serve with vegetables, for example broccoli, peas or fingers of carrot and swede. Add potatoes if the meal does not contain other starchy foods like rice or pasta.

Follow by a dessert, such as fruit segments, slices or shapes.

**Ideas for snacks**
Offer 2-3 small nutritious snacks each day. Avoid giving snacks too close to mealtimes as this means your child may have a smaller appetite for meals

- Small bowl of cereal and milk
- Cheese and crackers
- Breadsticks, chapatti, pancake or pitta bread with cream cheese, peanut butter or hummus
- Small sandwich
- Small slice of pizza
- A slice of apple with peanut butter or cream cheese
- Fruit pieces or vegetable sticks – for extra energy serve with yoghurt, cream cheese, peanut butter or hummus
Sugar and salty foods

Foods containing sugar are useful for adding extra energy.

Look after your child’s teeth by only offering sugary or sweet foods as a pudding after other foods as part of a meal, rather than between meals. Brush your child’s teeth twice each day and visit the dentist frequently.

Too much salt can give children a taste for salty foods and lead to health problems later in life. Therefore limit the amount of salt you give your child.

Vitamins

All children under five should have vitamin drops containing vitamins A and D.

For information on NHS Healthy Start vitamins see:

www.healthystart.nhs.uk

Vitamin drops should be available at your NHS Health Centre. Retail pharmacies also sell a range of them.

If your child is taking vitamin and mineral supplements, make sure you give the correct dose for their age, according to the recommendations on the label.

Be careful about using more than one preparation as it may cause the Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) may be exceeded.
Drinks

If your child is over 1 year old and still drinking from a bottle, it is important to wean them off this and encourage drinks from a free-flowing lidded or open beaker. This will avoid your child using the bottle as a comfort and having excess fluids. Excess fluids will interfere with their appetite for food.

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
- Aim for around 600mls (1 pint) of milk per day as it is nutritious and full-fat milk is high in energy
- Milk is a nutritious drink but should not replace meals – be careful not to let your child drink more than 600mls (1 pint) of milk in total per day
- A small drink (125mls) of pure unsweetened fruit juice with meals, is a useful source of vitamin C – children under 5 should have this diluted one part water to one part juice
- Water is the best drink to quench thirst
- Fruit juice drinks, squash and fizzy drinks, including low-sugar varieties, have limited nutritional value, can damage tooth enamel and contribute to tooth decay

Moving on from bottles to beakers and cups

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Main points for happy, healthy mealtimes

• Plan meal and snacks so your child eats regularly - this will allow them time to build up appetite and they won’t be too hungry or too tired to eat
• Offer a variety of foods from each of the food groups each day as this will provide them with the range of nutrients they need
• Offer two courses at lunch and the evening meal
• Make meals colourful and interesting so they are fun and appealing
• Allow enough time for meals, however do not let meals drag on too long
• Whenever possible eat together as a family so everyone can enjoy the meal and make it a social occasion
• The space you have to eat should be clean, warm and bright and free from distractions such as television, computer games and toys
• Offer small portions of food on a small plate as many children are put off by large portions
• Use appropriate sized cutlery, plates and cups – this will help your child eat independently
• Try not to use favourite foods as a reward to encourage children to eat foods they do not like as favourite 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
• Do not make a fuss if your child refuses to eat, this is a normal part of growing up - if you are concerned, talk to your Health Visitor, School Nurse or GP