

Food aversions and selective eating for children with ASD

Many children with autism find mealtimes challenging and have specific food aversions. They may struggle with the texture, colour or smell of certain foods. As adults, we have been quite desensitized to the textures, flavours, and smells of food, but many children have not. In the first few years of life, mealtimes are all about processing the sensory input they are receiving from various foods. Often, when kids display picky eating, the touch, taste, or smell of a food is being processed in their brain as dis-pleasurable in some way, particularly for children with sensory processing difficulties associated with ASD.

A need for routine may mean they find it difficult to try new foods, eat in new places or use unfamiliar plates and utensils. For some children, the social expectations involved in sitting through a family dinner may be a challenge in itself.

In severe cases, a limited diet can result in nutrition deficiencies, poor growth rate, or weight loss.

**TIPS**

Tips for meal times for children with ASD

- Relax before meal times so you and your child both feel calm.
- Develop a meal schedule so your child knows what to expect and when – when they will be eating, where they will sit and how long for.
- Encourage food play – allow your child to touch, smell and taste unfamiliar foods at their own pace.
- Involve your child in the food preparation process.
- Focus on positive behaviours at meal times – negative behaviours may be a way for your child to escape the meal. Focus instead on trying to engage your child in conversations about the food or praising your child for sitting nicely or trying a new food.
- If they are able to, ask them to explain their likes and dislikes to you.
- Introduce new foods slowly and alongside regularly eaten foods – For example, if your child only eats white toast, for example, you could start by introducing different brands of the same variety. Then, you could introduce a whole wheat variety, and eventually add small amounts of butter, jam, or other spreads.
- Avoid brand dependency by removing food from marked packaging and frequently switching the brand of the food item.
- Don't take it personally – your child's food preferences are not a reflection on your cooking skills.
- Be patient and manage your expectations – changing eating habits can take time and you are doing your best.

Speak to your GP, health visitor or dietician if you are concerned about your child's eating.