



Feeding fussy eaters

Some fussiness is normal; almost half of all children have a fussy period in their early years. This can mean stressful mealtimes for parents.

When it comes to mealtimes, it is important to keep in mind that:

- Parents are responsible for choosing what, when and where a child eats.
- Children are responsible for choosing how much and whether they eat.

Why could a child be refusing food?

There are often reasons why a child refuses a meal. These can include:

- Eating frequent snacks throughout the day or filling up on drinks—in particular, sweet drinks or milk (aim for one hour or more between snacks/drinks and meals).
- Having too much food on their plate.
- Foods feel unsafe or unfamiliar. Remember that it can take many exposures to a food before your child will try and accept it.
- Being too tired, especially at dinner time.
- Having low activity levels during the day. Children often eat more when they are more active.
- Growth patterns – children can have large appetites before a growth period, and then have a small appetite after.
- The texture of the food is challenging.
- Illness.

How to help develop healthy eating habits?

Children have excellent appetite regulation, which means the amount of food they eat varies to suit their energy needs. Learn to trust your child's appetite and help them to understand when they are still hungry or full. Look at what your child eats across the course of a week than a day at a time. This can help you plan when you may try new foods. Introducing and trying new foods and handling food refusal requires patience.

Allowing your child to choose how much to eat allows them to feel a sense of control at mealtimes and can lead to a greater variety of foods eaten. Encourage children to eat the family meal to prevent making separate meals. Eating in a group environment helps children to watch others eat different foods and try new foods. If they refuse to eat the meal, place the food in the fridge and offer it later when they are hungry and ask for something to eat. Try not to worry if your child only eats a small amount. If they don't eat, do your best to stay calm and not stress, they will not starve.

When should you seek advice from a health professional?

- If you feel your child's growth is slowing (not gaining enough weight or is not growing taller).
- If your child is 'stuck' on particular textures (e.g. puree texture).
- Your child has less than 20 food items they accept in their diet.
- Your child avoids an entire food group for many months.

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Here are some tips that may help develop healthy eating habits and prevent a battle at mealtimes:

Mealtimes

- Children have small stomachs, so provide five to six small nutritious meals each day.
- Keep to regular mealtimes so your child knows when the next meal is coming.
- Try to make the mealtime a pleasant experience and praise your child when they eat well. Don't reward or bribe with food.
- Talk about the foods you are eating – colours, flavours, smells, textures.
- Avoid distractions, such as TVs or iPads, so your child can focus on their meal.

Exploring foods

- Involve your child in planning (and preparing) the week's meals and shopping.
- Allow your child to experiment as they eat – touching, smelling, nibbling and chewing are all steps towards accepting foods.
- Continue to offer previously refused and new foods. Provide these with familiar foods and in small amounts.
- Invite adventurous food friends over. Eating together for children can be a motivation to try new foods.

Eating space

- Set a time limit if your child eats slowly (20 to 30 minutes is enough for a meal). If your child hasn't finished or has left food after this time, calmly remove their plate.
- Set a good example by eating your meal with your child at the table.
- If the thought of introducing new foods at lunch or dinner is overwhelming, try it at snack time instead. Try sending new foods to day care or school and see if they eat it there.
- Make sure your child is sitting at the table in a supportive chair, ideally with a footrest. This helps their posture and their use of utensils.

For parents to know

- Understand that children may not always finish their meals, which is ok.
- Use a 'one bite' policy. This means having a bite of a food, even if they don't swallow it.
- Use positive, encouraging language and stay calm. Praise one thing each meal, e.g. "good chewing!"
- Avoid pressuring your child to try something as it could create negative associations with the food.
- Try to avoid bribing with food or substituting uneaten food with other meals or snacks.