



Advice for Children with Autism and Restricted Eating

Autism is a lifelong condition that affects the brain and how a person communicates and relates to other people and the world around them. Good nutrition is important for everyone as poor diet can affect mood, learning and sleep. There are some common problems in people with autism which can mean a healthy diet may be harder to achieve. These problems include:

- Fear of trying new foods.
- Anxiety around mealtimes which may be because of eating with other people, sitting at a table or eating with particular cutlery.
- Sensory processing difficulties, which can change the way things feel, smell and taste. Certain food textures may cause symptoms of gagging, vomiting or total avoidance.
- Pica (eating non-food items). This can be due to autism itself or nutritional deficiencies in the diet, such as a lack of iron.
- Constipation, diarrhoea and reflux are more common.

These factors can be difficult to manage and can put a strain on family life. However, it is uncommon for children with these problems to not grow properly and to have severe vitamin and mineral deficiencies. If your child has any of the following then you should seek help from a Dietitian:

- Accepting fewer than 20 foods.
- Refusing all foods from one or more food groups.
- Constipated – constipation can have a huge impact on appetite and may require medication.
- Losing weight or not growing well.
- Gaining weight excessively.
- Coughing and choking while eating, or has recurrent chest infections, especially if they have developmental delay or physical disabilities.

Information for Patients

A dietitian can look at whether your child's diet is giving them all the nutrients that they need. They can also give advice on introducing new foods, nutritional supplements, and practical advice to help reduce mealtime stress.

Mastering the basics

It is important to aim to eat foods from all the 5 main food groups, as per the 'Eatwell Guide' below. The main food groups include;

- **Starchy carbohydrates** - Starchy food should make up just over a third of the food we eat. Choose higher fibre wholegrain varieties where possible.
- **Fruit and vegetables** - Aim to eat at least 5 portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables each day. Choose from fresh, frozen, tinned or dried.



- **Dairy or calcium-fortified dairy alternatives** - Milk, cheese and yogurt are good sources of protein and some vitamins. They are also an important source of calcium, which helps keep our bones strong.
- **Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins** – these are also good sources of iron. Aim to have a portion with lunch and evening meal.
- **Fats** - Unsaturated fats are healthier fats and include vegetable, rapeseed, olive and sunflower oils. Eat these in small amounts.

Although your child may have a very limited diet, you may be reassured to see that they do eat foods from more than one food group. Aim to encourage your child to eat foods from as many of these food groups as possible.

Dos and don'ts

- ✓ Limit meal times to no longer than 20 minutes
- ✓ Keep calm and ignore challenging behaviour
- ✓ Gentle encouragement to sit with the family to eat
- ✓ Offer food regularly - aim for 3 meals and 2-3 snacks per day
- ✓ Look out for any possible food allergies which may mean your child avoids these foods because they cause discomfort
- ✓ Look out for constipation/reflux as these can have an impact on appetite and seek advice from your GP
- ✓ Try modifying foods to improve the sensory experience, for example by puréeing or using food colouring
- X Never force your child to eat
- X Don't make comments about uneaten food
- X Never use food as a reward or punishment for eating well/not well
- X Do not hide new foods within foods which are currently accepted

Understanding your child's eating habits

It can be very helpful to keep a diary of eating habits, foods eaten and other factors which can affect what your child eats. An example diary is below:

	Food eaten	Where were they when they ate the food?	Who was there, and how did they react?	Was there any music/TV/tablets on at the time of eating?
Monday	9:05: 3 spoons of yogurt	Dining table	Mum fed with spoon	No TV/tablet/music
	10:05: 1 x packet of ready salted crisps	Sofa	Mum, self-feeding	TV on
	12:40: 5 chips, 3 popcorn chicken	Nursery on small table/chairs	With other children. No encouragement to eat-plate left in front of them	No TV/tablet/music

This could reveal some causes of the eating difficulties. Try to work out whether there are any patterns in the amount, type or range of foods being eaten. For example do they have a preference for dry/crunchy/crispy textures? Do they like spicy foods or foods that are hot or cold? Do they prefer to feed themselves?

Your child can be sensitive to the environment around them. Consider the following if they don't eat foods which they usually would:

- Positioning of the food on the plate, do they eat better if foods do not touch?
- Is the food over or undercooked?
- Are there 'bits' on the food?
- Has the packaging changed? Is the logo a different colour?
- Is the box damaged?
- Is the food a different brand?

Tips for children who have a limited diet/fear of trying new foods

Be reassured that often children who have a limited diet can still eat foods from different food groups. Meals/snacks do not need to be different every day to still get a variety of nutrients. However, it is important to continue to try to increase the variety of foods eaten.

- Continue to offer foods which your child will eat but aim to try one new food per week. It doesn't have to be at a meal time. If it is at a meal time then explain that they can still eat the foods they usually eat but they need to try a tiny amount of the new food first (see step-wise introduction of new foods).
- Give foods that are slightly different to their preferred food e.g. if they will only eat thin cut white bread from a large loaf. Try offering the following foods:
 - Small loaf, same bread
 - Same brand but thickly sliced
 - Unsliced bread
 - 50/50 white and wholemeal bread
 - Pitta bread
 - Pizza bases
- Offer foods which are of a similar texture/temperature/colour/presentation to foods already accepted. E.g. if your child will eat chicken nuggets, try offering breaded/battered chicken breast/burger or popcorn chicken.

Tips for helping to improve eating by changing the environment

The following tips may also be helpful:

- Your child might eat better if they do not have any distractions e.g. TV/tablets
- Playing favourite music or an audio story may help relax your child around meal times
- They may not like the feel of metal cutlery in their mouth and therefore plastic cutlery or finger foods may be preferred
- Your child might find it too distracting to eat in a noisy dining room/hall – could they eat in a quiet room instead? The chair they sit on may be too hard – add a cushion
- If a meal is not going to be at home, prepare your child in advance by telling them who will be there, who they will be sitting with or next to, what people might talk about, and what they could say to start a conversation
- If your child prefers hot food and wants to have a packed lunch, use a food flask to keep foods warm

Tips for helping to improve eating if there are difficulties with communication

- Make visual daily and/or weekly menus of foods – display the time of the next meal
- Provide visual tools to help your child to express and recognise their needs, feelings and preferences; such as stress scales, hunger and fullness scales, or happy/unhappy face pictures
- Have a food group chart and encourage your child to have at least one food from each group each day.
- Try to be very specific when talking about food and try using pictures. For example, apples can look and taste different, but we call them all apples. Discuss that apples can be sliced, cooked/stewed and baked
- It can be helpful to model the behaviour you are trying to encourage. This might mean the whole family follows a rule about eating something each day from each food group

Useful Resources/Contact Details

- National Autistic Society www.autism.org.uk
- Autism West Midlands www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk

For further information please contact the Paediatric Dietitians on 0121 424 1674.

If you require this information in another format, such as a different language, large print, braille or audio version please ask a member of staff or email patientexperience@uhb.nhs.uk.