

Nutrition Guide

Is your child a picky eater?

The child who is afraid of eating

Your child is afraid of eating – what does this mean?

Your child has an intense fear of eating and shows strong resistance to any attempts to get him/her to eat. Infants and young children with this condition may show their fear of eating by crying, arching, or refusing to open their mouths when offered food.

A child may develop a fear of eating after experiencing a frightening or traumatic swallowing event, such as choking, gagging, or vomiting, or having a medical condition for which tubes were inserted through the mouth or throat. Children tube fed over extended periods that have little appetite and no experience of normal eating are especially resistant to feeding.

If you are unable to get your child to accept any fluids, he/she may be at risk for dehydration, and you should seek medical advice immediately.

What can you do to help your child?

It is very important that parents and caregivers ensure that feedings are not threatening or coercive; do not force your child to eat a food or use an instrument he/she fears. If your child is still an infant (up to 10 months of age), you can try to desensitize him/her by offering bottles or food when he/she is relaxed or half asleep.

Consider whether a traumatic eating event took place, particularly if your child stops eating abruptly. Question your child; if he/she is not old enough to understand and reply, speak to all caregivers that may have fed your child. If someone other than you is feeding the child, make sure they agree to follow the plan you are putting together to encourage your child to eat.

Some children may develop a fear of feeding after using a specific feeding instrument or after choking on a particular kind of food. If your child has a relatively mild fear of feeding, try offering alternative feeding instruments or foods. For example:

- If your child fears the bottle, offer a spoon or cup.
- If your child is afraid to eat solid foods, offer liquids instead and gradually advance to purees and soft foods.

The information provided in this fact sheet is intended to be used as a guide only. Please consult your doctor or dietitian for personalised advice.



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- If your child has been tube fed over an extended period of time or is older, he/she\ may have deeply ingrained behavior patterns as a result of fear of eating. Talk to your doctor if this is the case, as your child may need to be admitted to the hospital for intensive feeding management.

If you apply these principles, your child should start eating and gradually lose the fear of eating. However, if your child continues to be scared and you are unable to get him/her to consume any food or to accept any fluids, contact your doctor immediately, as your child needs medical attention.

Family matters

Food is such an important part of family life. Make sure that all family members and caregivers understand your child's eating difficulty and the need to avoid further distress or anxiety in association with eating. Make sure everyone agrees never to coerce or force your child to eat.

Importance of nutritional support

It is very important that children who are afraid of eating and refuse food still receive complete and balanced nutrition to ensure normal growth and development. Your doctor may recommend a nutritional supplement until the feeding difficulty is overcome, as nutritional support is essential for your child.

You have taken the first step to help your child – and your entire family. Over time, by implementing the tips described in this fact sheet and as you consult and work with your doctor or other health care providers, you should notice continuing improvement in your child's eating difficulties.

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