

# Faddy eating in young children

Many young children go through phases of refusing to eat certain foods or at times refusing to eat anything at all. This can be frustrating for parents/carers.

If your child is growing well and developing normally then try not to worry too much about their eating behaviour. Growth and development are very good indicators of appropriate food intake.

Refusing food is often a way of showing independence and a part of growing up. The good news is that most children grow out of fussy eating and eventually learn to eat a variety of foods!

This advice sheet has lots of suggestions for things you can do to ensure that your child has a balanced diet, enjoys food and contributes to a happy family mealtime.

Setting good eating patterns at this stage will stand your child in good stead for the rest of their life.

**It is often better to look at your child's food intake over a week rather than a day - it can help to make a list of what your child eats over a week.**

- If there are foods from all the food groups and some variety within each group then this may reassure you that the problem may not be as bad as you first thought.
- The amount of food eaten at each meal and snack will vary day-to-day depending on your child's appetite, fatigue, activity level and whether they are experiencing a growth spurt.
- Don't forget children are all different; a large active child will need more food than a smaller, less active child.
- Children's tastes change. One day they'll hate something, but a month later they may love it. It is important to continue offering a wide variety of healthy foods.

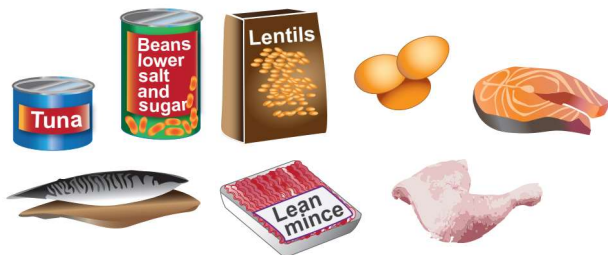


## Which foods to offer?

**A balanced diet contains a variety of foods from the 4 main food groups along with small amounts of fats and oil.**

### Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins

Offer 2-3 servings a day



- 2 servings a day for toddlers who eat meat and fish and 3 servings a day for vegetarians.
- Protein sources include lentils, beans, chicken, minced beef, eggs, lamb, fish, tofu, hummus, nut butters.

### Fruit and vegetables

Offer at each meal and some snacks



- Choose fresh, frozen or tinned fruit and vegetables. Dried fruit also counts but try to give with a meal as this is better for teeth.
- Try to offer a variety – aim for 5 small portions a day.
- Vegetables can also be added to sauces, soups and casseroles.

### Dairy and alternatives

Offer 3 servings a day



- A portion size for a toddler is 3-4oz (100-120mls) milk, a small pot of yoghurt or a cube of cheese.
- Give full fat milk from 12 months. Semi skimmed milk can be used from 2 years.
- Baby bottles should be swapped for a cup by one year of age.

### Starchy carbohydrates

Offer at each meal and some snacks



- Breads, potatoes, yams, rice, pasta, noodles, chapattis, breakfast cereals.
- Avoid too many carbohydrate foods that are high in added sugar.

**A supplement containing vitamins A, C and D is recommended for all children aged 1- 5 years of age. Ask your Health Visitor if you are eligible for Healthy Start vitamins.**

## Managing faddy eating

### Creating happy mealtimes

- Try to eat in a calm and relaxed environment without distractions so your child is able to concentrate on eating e.g. turn the television off.
- Never force a child to eat. Your child is telling you they have had enough to eat when they:
  - say 'No' or turn their head away
  - keep their mouth shut when food is offered
  - push the spoon, bowl or plate away
  - they scream, shout or get upset
  - repeatedly spit food out
  - hold food in their mouth and refuse to swallow it
- When a child shows the above signs accept they have had enough by removing the uneaten food without comment. Don't replace a refused meal with a completely different meal.
- Limit meal times to 20-30 minutes and accept that after this a child is not going to eat any more; wait for the next snack or meal and offer nutritious foods again.
- Try not to pressure, persuade or get cross with your child – it can have the opposite effect.
- Try not to show you are worried, upset or annoyed by your child not eating.
- Don't rush a meal; some children eat slowly and rushing can put them off.



### Non-food rewards

- Avoid offering food or drink as a reward for your child eating other foods first or for good behaviour.
- Examples of non-food rewards include:
  - Giving your child praise – A simple 'well done' can go a long way.
  - Each time your child tries a refused food give them a sticker.
  - An outing, such as a trip to the park, swimming pool, shops, or other favourite place.
  - Playing a game with your child.

## Mealtime routines

- Develop a daily routine of 3 meals and 2-3 healthy snacks around your child's sleeping pattern. Young children don't eat well if they are very hungry or tired.
- Offer 2 courses at each meal. One savoury and one sweet (for example fruit and yoghurt), to give your child as much opportunity to take in the energy and nutrients they need.
- Give small portions - if these are finished, praise your child and offer more. Young children can be overwhelmed by large portions.
- Offer finger foods as often as possible. Young children enjoy feeding themselves and finger foods are often easier for them to manage.
- Try not to allow your child to "pick" or "graze" between meals; offer regular meals and nutritious snacks instead.
- Avoid giving snacks or drinks too close to mealtimes – this can fill your child up before meals.

## Role modelling

- Children learn by copying others so try and eat with your child as often as possible.
- Shared mealtimes are a great opportunity for children to pick up healthy eating habits and for children to try a new food which they might see others eating and enjoying.
- Arrange for your child to eat with other children occasionally as some children eat better when they are with their own age group.
- Try to make meals sociable occasions and make positive comments about the food - they will be more willing to try it.



## Exposure

- Keep offering a variety of foods – don't give up offering new foods if they refuse them at first.
- It can take time for children to learn to accept new foods so try to be patient. It can take as many as 15 attempts before a child will accept a new food. Remember to praise your child when they do well.
- Involve your child in food shopping and preparing the meal; this will encourage your child to have a positive attitude to food.
- Don't forget to include some iron rich foods to prevent anaemia. These include foods such as red meat, oily fish and eggs. Iron fortified breakfast cereals, such as wheat biscuits or ready oats are good sources too. Vitamin C from fruit and vegetables will help absorb iron from foods.

## Fluids

- Offer about 6 drinks a day; 3-4 oz (100-120mls) is about right. Give all drinks in a cup or beaker not a baby bottle. Water is a good choice.
- Don't let your child drink more than 600mls (1 pint) of milk in total during the day and night. Milk is a nutritious drink but should not replace meals.



## Getting messy

- Learning to eat is a messy time - don't worry if your child makes a mess or uses their fingers to play with food, as with learning any new skill it takes practice.



## Other reasons your child may not eat

Occasionally, there may be medical reasons why your child may not eat.

The most common reasons are:

- Constipation
- Anaemia
- Reflux

If you suspect your child is suffering from any of these, seek advice from your health visitor or doctor.

For more information about feeding your baby speak to your Health Visitor or Community Nursery Nurse.

For tips, recipes and meal ideas visit:

**[www.firststepsnutrition.org](http://www.firststepsnutrition.org)**  
**[www.everychildwales.co.uk](http://www.everychildwales.co.uk)**  
**[www.nhs.uk/start4life](http://www.nhs.uk/start4life)**



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