

# The Picky Eater



Most toddlers and young children go through a stage of refusing food. This is often associated with learning to take control and they find food a very effective tool - it upsets adults! Usually this doesn't lead to any growth or nutritional problems.

Commonly children avoid certain foods: vegetables, meat or milk. Or they may eat large amounts of one food.

## **The child who won't eat**

Often food refusal begins after one year of age when a child's rate of growth has slowed and hunger isn't so great. Children learn very quickly how to use their power over parents or carers. Parents and carers should be reassured however, that healthy children will not starve. Hunger will eventually compel them to eat. Children do not know what they should eat but they do know how much they need.

Many children refuse a food not because they don't like it but because they are not used to it. Keep presenting it frequently. It may take 10 attempts but eventually they should get the message.

## **Children who won't eat may**

- Drink lots of milk, juice, cordial or milkshakes. This gives them enough calories (energy) but not essential nutrients like iron or zinc.
- Fill up on snacks between meals eg biscuits, lollies, chippies.
- Refuse to eat until finally they get something they want.
- Refuse to eat so they get attention.

## **How do you deal with these?**

- Check what and how much your child is drinking. Check that your child is not filling up on sugary drinks like juice, cordial and soft drinks. If drunk in large amounts drinks can easily fill little tummies and dull the appetite. Some children can drink too much milk – about 2 cups a day is all that is needed.

Sugary drinks are not recommended for children. Water and milk are the best drinks. Encourage drinking water – this means setting an example by drinking water yourself.

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This information is not intended to replace the advice of your doctor or individual consultation with a Registered Dietitian. This information may only be used in its entirety.

Code: NUT0086

Date: October 2005, authorised by the Nutrition and Physical Activity Team, Community and Public Health.

- Children need to snack only once between meals. Offer a variety of healthy snacks eg fruit, vegetables, sandwiches, cheese, yoghurt, muffins.
- Praise good behaviour and give your children your attention when they eat well. Don't make a fuss when they don't eat.
- Try the "one bite" approach. Include a small serve of something your child doesn't like and say "you must have one bite. If you don't then you leave the table immediately, and get ready for bed." There may be groaning but generally children rarely choose to send themselves to bed over just one bite. What usually occurs is that overtime children become accustomed to eating all sorts of flavours and textures of healthy foods.
- Sit at the table for meals and avoid distractions while your child is eating - turn the television off.
- If your child leaves the table without eating a reasonable amount, place the meal in the fridge and re offer it when they come back hungry.
- Make sure the dinner meal isn't too late - an over tired child is more likely to refuse food.
- Give a variety of healthy foods to choose from and continue to offer new foods. Don't get into the habit of preparing special meals or continuing to offer other choices until your child finally eats. Usually this will end up being foods that are high in fat, sugar and/or salt. This will also give the child the message that if they refuse a food they dislike, they will soon be presented with one they like.
- Involve your child in preparing and choosing food.

Checking your child's weight and growth chart can show whether she/he is growing. Your Plunket or practice nurse can help you with this. If you are concerned that your child is not eating well, it can be helpful to keep a food and beverage record for several days. This will give you a good idea of your child's overall eating pattern. Compare the record with the guidelines recommended by the Ministry of Health. Booklets are available from your local public health unit.

*If your child is thin, pale and tires easily, visit your GP for a check-up*

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