

Preventing Fussy Eating

Preventing fussy eating can start even before your baby is born, and continues throughout childhood. Here are our evidence-based guidelines to help prevent and overcome fussy eating in children.

During pregnancy

- Eat a wide variety of foods from all the plant food groups
- Base your diet on minimally-processed food ("whole") foods
- Include green vegetables, other colourful vegetables, whole grains, legumes (lentils, chick peas, beans, soy products), fruit and nuts/seeds every day.
- Include the herbs and spices that you normally use in family meals

After the baby is born

- Continue to eat a wide variety of plant foods (as above)
- Model the eating habits that you would like your baby to develop
- Ensure your baby sees you eat a range of healthy foods and meals, including colourful vegetables and fruits
- As much as possible, avoid eating "junk" foods and highly processed snack foods in front of your baby

When introducing "solids"

- Introduce one new food at a time, keeping foods separate at first, not all mashed up together
- Introduce vegetables first (including green and red/orange/yellow vegetables)
- After 2-4 weeks of vegetables, introduce iron-fortified cereals, legumes (e.g. red lentils, tofu), nut/seed pastes and fruit
- Avoid offering foods in a form that are [choking hazards](#).
- Gradually increase the texture of food offered from smooth to lumpier
- Avoid offering foods with added salt or sugar (until 12 months of age)
- Look for cues that your baby has had enough to eat (e.g. turning head away, shutting mouth)
- Keep offering foods that have been refused in the past (you might have to offer a food on 20 occasions before your child will like it)
- Offer a wide variety of individual foods. (e.g. different vegetables, different grains, different fruits, different legumes etc. Aim to have offered about 100 different foods by the time your child is 12 months of age)
- Include baby in family meal times
- Have baby seated in a high chair at the table
- Offer food at regular times (e.g. start with at one meal per day, then two, then three regular meals per day)
- After introducing foods separately, offer some meals where foods are mixed up (e.g. pasta with lentil & vegetable sauce mixed through it, risotto made from rice and mashed/finely chopped vegetables and tofu.
- Increase your child's exposure to various healthy foods (especially vegetables) by showing your child pictures of vegetables (e.g. in books), taking them shopping to buy fresh produce, showing them the raw ingredients for meals etc.
- Encourage your baby to feed him/herself with a spoon (and later a baby fork)
- Encourage your baby to learn to use a baby cup (with water in it)
- From about 8-9 months of age, start offering "solids" before breast / bottle.
- Don't offer snacks before the age of 12 months, stick with 3 meals per day (by about 8-9 months of age) plus breast/formula milk

Fussy eating in infants under 12 months of age is relatively unusual and can be due to physical or medical conditions that require treatment. Seek professional advice from your general medical practitioner, paediatrician or dietitian if your baby (from 6 months of age) appears unwilling to eat, cries when offered food or on swallowing, appears to have difficulty swallowing, appears to be in pain after eating, frequently refuses food, consistently has a poor appetite or eats very little, appears to have a negative reaction to some foods or is not growing or developing as expected.

Preventing Fussy Eating (continued)

From 12 months of age

- Offer the family meal and family foods, not a different meal / food, but modify texture as required. (e.g. mash or finely chop foods to reduce [choking hazard](#) and to enable child to feed self with cutlery)
- Offer 3 meals and 2 snacks per day, at regular times
- Do not allow your child to help themselves to food or drinks (other than water) or to “graze” in between meal/snack times as this reduces appetite for meals
- Continue to include your child in family meals and to offer food when seated in high chair, with no distractions
- Continue to model good eating habits (e.g. eating a variety of vegetables, trying new foods etc)
- Limit mealtimes to about 20-30 minutes duration
- Limit milk to no more than 2 cups (500 ml) per day (e.g. some on breakfast, some at morning snack time, some at afternoon snack time)
- Continue to offer a variety of vegetables at at least 2 meals per day and avoid offering fruit and vegetables at the same time
- Don't overload your child's plate. Ask them if they are still hungry / would like more if they finish the food offered
- Continue to encourage your child to feed him/herself and to practice using cutlery and drinking from a baby cup
- Accept that children will make a mess while learning to feed themselves
- Continue to offer foods that have been refused in the past
- Continue to offer new foods, and familiar foods in a different form
- Encourage your child to leave unwanted food on the plate rather than pushing it off the plate, giving it back to you or throwing it on the floor

For children of all ages

- Avoid distractions at meal times (i.e. no toys, books, phones etc at table, no TV)
- Aim to keep meal times relaxing and pleasant.
- Keep a neutral expression (“poker face”) at meal times and avoid becoming anxious, angry or excited about whether your child eats as much as you would like them to or not
- Never pressure your baby/child to eat
- Don't offer alternative food/drinks if your child eats little at a meal time as this simply rewards them for not eating their meal
- Don't praise your child for finishing everything on their plate
- Don't offer food as a reward or for comfort or to alleviate boredom or a negative mood
- Don't offer rewards for eating
- Be consistent and focus on the long-term goal of a child who happily eats a wide range of healthy foods and who is willing to try new foods
- Practice division of responsibility in feeding – see below

DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITY IN FEEDING

The parent/ caregiver decides WHAT food is offered, WHERE it is offered and WHEN it is offered. The child decides only HOW MUCH is eaten, if anything. The parents' job is to provide a healthy meal/snack and serve it to the child at the table, and the child's job is to decide how much (if any) is eaten. Until child is capable of feeding him/herself, parent can assist but should never try to coerce, force, cajole, threaten, bribe or pressure a child into eating.

The information here is of general nature and is not intended to replace individualised dietary advice from an Accredited Practising Dietitian.
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