

# What can I do if my child won't eat?

## Advice for Parents and Carers



Mealtimes are a time for learning about food and eating and should be an enjoyable experience. Eating together as a family encourages your child to copy eating and drinking behaviour and can be a good social time for families. Try some of the following to help encourage your child to eat more:

- Make sure your child is sitting in an appropriate chair and is sitting with the rest of the family.
- A calm, relaxed environment for eating and drinking may be helpful for some children, especially if they are easily distracted, however some children may benefit from background noise. Try both approaches to find out what works best for your child.
- Use brightly coloured bowls and plates. These may make the meal look more appealing.
- Try not to show your concern or make negative comments in front of your child.
- Never leave your child unsupervised whilst they are eating or drinking.
- Offer regular meals and snacks at set times, as this is better than letting your child 'pick' at food during the day.
- Avoid fluids just before and during meals, as this will reduce your child's appetite. Often children are not hungry because they have had too much juice or milk during the day and night. Try to avoid giving more than 1½ pints of fluid during the day. Children over the age of one year should only be offered milk or water; and not be given drinks during the night.
- Give your child lots of positive praise when they do eat and ignore any food refusal; calmly offer the food three times before telling your child the meal is over, then remove the meal without any further comment.
- Limit mealtimes to 20 minutes. Try not to rush a meal, as your child may be slow to eat, but try not to let the meal drag on for too long. Your Dietitian will advise you on how to increase the energy density of your child's meal so the mealtime can be reduced, if necessary.
- Offer new foods in a predictable pattern, e.g. once a week for 8 weeks. Intersperse new meals with old ones. E.g. 3 new teatime/lunches and 4 tolerated teatime/lunches a week.
- Do not worry if they make a mess, this is an important part of your child's development. If your child stops eating at a meal, try once to encourage him or her to take a little more. If this is successful show that you are pleased and give positive verbal reinforcement.
- Never use food as a reward. **NEVER force feed your child.**
- Only check your child's weight once every 8 weeks. Most fussy eaters maintain good growth despite their apparent lack of intake.

### For more information:

<https://infantandtoddlerforum.org/toddlers-to-preschool/fussy-eating/>

<https://infantandtoddlerforum.org/toddlers-to-preschool/portion-sizes-for-toddlers/toddler-portion-sizes-table/>

<https://infantandtoddlerforum.org/health-and-childcare-professionals/factsheets>