

Nutrition and Eating Problems

What are the nutritional needs of children with autism spectrum disorders?

Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) have the same general nutrition needs as all children and teens. Children with ASDs may be picky eaters, so they may not get the nutrients they need. For example, if a child doesn't drink milk (because the child refuses or because of a special diet), the child may not get enough calcium and vitamin D. If a child doesn't eat enough foods made from grains, she may not get enough fiber and B vitamins. Some children with ASDs have such a limited diet that they are at risk for nutritional disorders. They may also be at higher risk for low iron intake.

What should we know about eating problems?

Eating problems are common in children, but for children with ASDs, the problems may last longer, be affected by differences in sensory processing such as how the child can taste and smell, and be the result of learned patterns of behavior. Up to three quarters of children with ASDs may have problems with eating. These problems include

- Limited range of food texture, color, taste, or temperature
- Food rituals or obsessions
- Eating or mouthing nonfood items (pica)
- Compulsive eating
- Packing the mouth with food
- Throwing up, gagging, and chewing or re-chewing food for a long time

If your child feels sick after eating a certain food, he may refuse to eat that food again. This may happen even if the food was not what made your child sick. Your child might also have withdrawal from favorite foods, refusing to eat what has been a favorite food in the past. This may be behavioral and related to preference and obsession.

What can we do to improve our child's eating?

A great way to work on eating and nutrition issues is to set up a regular structure for mealtimes. Offer your child meals and snacks at about the same times each day. Keep mealtime calm and limit distractions. Sit down with your child and eat the same foods. Your child should feed herself if able.

At each meal, be sure to serve at least one food that your child has eaten and liked in the past. This way, your child has something she is likely to eat. You should not be a short-order cook. Ask your child to eat, but do not plead or threaten. Once the child leaves the table, the meal is finished. To encourage eating at scheduled meals and snacks, do not give your child food or drink other than water until the next meal or snack. Your child will learn to eat what the rest of the family eats. Therefore, the rest of the family will need to model good mealtime behaviors and eat fruits and vegetables and avoid grazing.

To address special feeding problems like mouth packing, re-chewing of food, and severely restricted diets, you will likely need help from experts in behavior, speech, or occupational therapy. Talking with a nutritionist may help.

What might our doctor check for?

Your child's doctor should review your child's diet at well-child checks. Let your doctor know if your child has a very limited diet. The doctor should do a history and physical exam to help find medical factors that could be related to eating problems. Eating nonfood items (pica) may be related to low levels of iron in the blood, delayed development (very young children explore by mouthing items), sensory-seeking behaviors, or obsessions and anxiety. Blood lead levels should be checked periodically if your child is at risk for lead exposure. Your child's doctor may order tests to check for nutritional disorders.

What else should we remember about eating and nutrition?

Keep in mind that what you think children need to eat may actually be too much. Your child's doctor should be able to tell you the portion sizes that are best for your child depending on his age and weight. Also remember that a balanced diet is over the whole week, not in one meal. In addition, eating problems do not go away overnight. You will need to keep teaching your child the new rules for eating (see handout "Behavioral Challenges").

Resources

Ernsperger L, Stegen-Hanson T. *Just Take a Bite: Easy, Effective Answers to Food Aversions and Eating Challenges*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, Inc; 2004

Legge B. *Can't Eat, Won't Eat: Dietary Difficulties and the Autism Spectrum*. London: Jessica Kingsley; 2002

Satter E. *How to Get Your Child to Eat—But Not Too Much*. Palo Alto, CA: Bull Publishing Co; 1987

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