

Is your child a poor eater?



Information for parents Community Dietetics Service

If your child is refusing to eat, getting upset at mealtimes, eating very small amounts or playing up at mealtimes this can be very upsetting and frustrating. Sometimes small children's need for food can be over-estimated by parents and carers, so check first whether they are continuing to grow along their centile line in their red book and that they are eating a variety of healthy foods.

Most families go through this at some time but if it goes on for several weeks and affects your child's growth and development you may need support to change your child's eating behaviour.

The following tips can help:

- Give 3 regular meals plus 2 or 3 small snacks between meals so your child does not become too tired or hungry to eat. Offer a wide variety of foods and whenever possible eat meals with your child.
- Encourage your child to feed him/herself with a bit of encouragement from yourself when it is needed. This may be a bit messy at times but allow them to explore the food with their hands; this will allow them to become more familiar with food.
- Give small portions of food so as not to over face your child. If they eat all that's given you can always offer some more.
- Avoid showing that you are worried, cross or annoyed by what your child is doing at meal times. Avoid force feeding your child. Attention for bad behaviour can encourage it to continue. When food is eaten give plenty of praise and encouragement, even if it is only small amounts.
- If your child refuses the food offered don't offer them a completely different meal instead. Wait until the next mealtime or snack time before offering more food. Do, however, always offer a small pudding, regardless of whether the savoury part of the meal has been eaten.
- A child can learn that refusing to eat allows him/her to miss that meal or course altogether, therefore persevere by offering or encouraging a mouthful every 10 to 20 seconds for several minutes of each course.
- Don't let your child drink too much before or during meals. Drinks soon fill up a small stomach. Be particularly aware of children still using a feeding bottle or "sucky" cup, especially if they have unlimited access, as they are likely to over-drink through habit and enjoyment.
- Give children's vitamin drops daily until 5 years old. These can be purchased from pharmacies or supermarkets. Healthy Start vitamins can be obtained from all Children's Centres if you are in receipt of vouchers or can be purchased from Children's Centres, some GP surgeries and pharmacies.
- Offer rewards for good behaviour at meal times such as a trip to the park, reading a book, watching a video. Don't however use food as a reward.
- If mealtimes continue to be difficult and your child is not growing and developing normally, seek further advice and support from your Health Visitor or GP.



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