

Fussy eating

Tips for helping children eat well when receiving treatment for cancer

Young children often become fussy with food especially if they are faced with unusual or new situations such as in hospital or when undergoing treatment.

Behaviours commonly seen around mealtimes are tantrums, food fads, extreme dislikes and playing with food. These behaviours can cause lots of frustration for parents but are quite normal.

Fussy eating patterns can be even harder to manage when your child is having treatment for cancer. Disruption to normal family routines and limited access to foods may also decrease appetite and contribute to fussy eating behaviours.



Why do fussy eating patterns happen?

- After the first year, growth rates slow down considerably.
- Toddlers begin to show independence. Choosing and refusing food is a way of expressing their control, especially in an environment where most of their independence is limited due to procedures, treatments and giving medications.
- Children's appetites change based on their energy needs. Children eat more during growth spurts and at the onset of puberty.
- Treatment can affect appetite which can make fussy eating patterns worse.
- Less physical activity due to treatment will also impact appetite.

Strategies to help

As a general rule, it is OK to be more flexible with your child's eating habits when in hospital. For example, they may only want to drink flavoured milk and eat toast. Usually in hospital your child will be either unwell, having treatment or undergoing procedures that involve fasting or discomfort. Offering preferred foods and flexibility play an important role in providing comfort for your child. However, when at home, try where possible to follow a normal family routine.

- All children need a variety of foods to ensure good health. Children have small stomachs and seem to eat better with a number of regular snacks throughout the day rather than three fixed meals per day. As a guide, plan for three main meals (these might be small) and two to three snacks per day. Try to allow 90 minutes to two hours between each meal or snack.
- Encourage your child to eat a range of foods but don't be too strict on this. If they refuse all vegetables, try offering raw varieties and make sure they are having some fruit. If your child refuses milk, try yoghurt, cheese and custard as ways of getting dairy products in!
- Offer your child choices such as 'Carrots or peas?' instead of asking 'Do you want any vegetables?' Remember if they reject a food once, it does not mean they will never eat it. Offer it again a little later. It can take more than 10 times for a child to try or accept a new food.
- If your child is not eating well, check how much fluid they are having. Sometimes toddlers fill up on sweet drinks or milk, which leaves little room for food. For small eaters, try to give food before drinks.



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- Tempt your child with novelties like fancy drinking straws, and new or decorated cups, cutlery, and plates. You can also try serving food in different ways, such as cutting food into various shapes or serving food in fun-shaped plates and food moulds.
- Most children are able to balance the amount of food or energy their body needs if offered nutritious foods regularly and if they are not forced to finish everything on the plate. This means that if only a little is eaten at one meal, they will probably catch up with a bigger meal or snack later. This is essential to help your child learn to control appetite and food intake as they get older, and may help prevent problems such as overeating later in life.

Questions and answers

What if my child won't drink milk?

Many children refuse milk during treatment due to their tastes changing. Try other sources of calcium that have a stronger, saltier taste such as: grated cheese, cheese spread, cheese sticks or feta cheese. You can also try custard, yoghurt and flavoured milk.

What if my child won't eat meat?

Try serving meat minced or finely chopped with gravy or a sauce; try an alternative source of protein like eggs.

For high-energy snack ideas the *High energy food and drinks* resource is available from your dietitian and the PICS website at www.vics.org.au/pics/resources.

What should I do if my child's eating is affected by steroids?

Please refer to www.vics.org.au/pics/resources for the resource titled *Dealing with increased appetite when taking steroids*.

Quick tips for helping your child through a fussy eating stage

You can help your child get through this fussy eating stage with some (or all) of these ideas:

- Offer meals in a relaxed environment.
- Prepare your child in advance for the meal. Let them know that lunch will be on the table in five minutes, so that they can begin to wind up their activity.
- Focus on the meal. Set the table, turn off the TV, and sit down to eat the meal together.
- Start with a small serve, as too much food may overwhelm your child. A rough guide is one tablespoon of each food per year of age.
- Serve your child the same foods the rest of the family eats.
- Serve a new food with one your child already eats.
- Offer words of encouragement, but don't argue or force your child to eat.
- Respect your child if they tell you they are full.
- Don't assume your child will dislike a particular food.
- Try not to fuss if your child refuses to eat.
- New foods can be rejected at first, but be patient and keep offering them.
- Give children enough time to eat but remove food after 20 minutes if your child has lost interest.
- Be a positive role model – eat well and your child will too.

The most important tip to remember is that parents and children have different roles at mealtimes. Remember that parents decide what foods are offered, when foods are offered and where they are eaten. But only the child can decide how much and which foods are eaten. Relax and focus on the positives. Try to always find something to praise at the meal, even if it is just that fact that they sat at the table.

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