

## Patient information

# Advice for managing fussy eating behaviours for children over 5 years old.

### Introduction into fussy eating

Many children go through phases of refusing to eat certain foods; this is particularly common in young children but can occur at any time. It is often a child's way of exerting their independence and testing the boundaries. It is a normal part of growing up. This 'common fussy eating' is often frustrating and stressful for you as a parent, but rarely causes any serious nutritional, medical or growth problems, and is a phase that is grown out of.

Some children have eating habits that are considered much more than common fussy eating. Professionals may call these eating habits extreme fussy eating, selective eating, or restrictive eating. Restrictive eating can continue for much longer than common fussy eating – sometimes even into adulthood. It is common in children with social communication disorders such as autism, but also occurs in children with no other developmental problems. Many children with restrictive eating continue to grow and develop as expected; however, some children experience adverse effect such as slow growth, nutritional deficiencies, severe dental decay, dehydration, or severe constipation.

### Fussy eating and Extreme fussy eating

What is the difference between common and extreme fussy eating? There are no universal definitions, but the table on the next page highlights the generally accepted differences. Every child is different so you may find your child has some behaviours across both columns, or displays behaviours that are not listed at all. These are just examples of some behaviours that may help you understand the extent of the fussy eating behaviour your child is displaying.

<b>Fussy eating behaviours</b>	<b>Extreme fussy eating behaviours</b>
Usually no or only minor growth or health consequences	In some cases, can lead to faltering growth and/or nutrient deficiencies
Children usually grow out of it over weeks to months when the first line help is followed and persevered with	Children can take a long time to make even small changes to their eating – even when the first line help is followed. A wider multidisciplinary approach may be needed to improve eating behaviours.
Eat a range of foods including some from each food group although some days may only eat very little or have preferences for a narrow range of foods	Eats a limited range of foods – often less than 20 different ones. Often has some food groups they eat nothing from
Can be upset by new foods or changes in favourite foods or foods touching each other	Can be upset by new foods or changes in favourite foods or foods touching each other – this may be more extreme and seem like a phobia
Won't 'starve themselves' if you just offer usual family foods and ignore the tantrums	At risk of becoming ill from not eating or drinking

## 5 First line steps to help manage fussy eating behaviours

### 1: Establish an eating routine

- Offer 3 small meals a day – breakfast, lunch and dinner, plus two or three snacks.
- Try to eat at similar times each day to help your child regulate their appetite, e.g. breakfast at about 8am, a snack at about 10am, lunch at about 12 midday, and so on.
- Keep mealtimes short but not rushed – roughly twenty to thirty minutes for each meal.
- Have a routine at the beginning and end of eating times that involves your child, e.g. washing hands and laying out the cutlery and then helping clear up and washing hands at the end.

### 2: Limit drinks

- Drinks can fill up your child's small stomach – so don't offer them for about thirty minutes before a meal or snack time.
- Try giving a drink towards the end of a meal or snack time instead.
- Limit milk as a drink to a pint, or 600ml plant based fortified alternative milk, 500ml cow's milk. Less milk can be offered after the age of 2 years.

### 3: Foster a healthy attitude towards eating

- Eat with your child to help them learn by copying you and other members of the family.

- Give your child gentle encouragement to eat, but not too much, and never force feed.
- Keep meal and snack times calm and relaxed.
- Avoid distractions such as television or toys. Use mealtimes as a chance for your child to explore food.
- Encourage your child to learn to eat to their appetite – try not to insist on them clearing their plate and let them have second helpings if they are still hungry.
- If your child refuses to eat, or lets you know they've finished, take it away without comment and then wait until the next planned meal to offer food again.
- Involve your children in things involving food outside mealtimes – shopping, food preparation, laying the table and food play.
- Ignore any behaviours you don't want them to repeat, such as throwing food, refusing foods or whinging. Praise good behaviour like sitting still and trying something new.

#### **4: You decide what to offer**

- Offer your usual family food if possible. It may be mashed, chopped, or modified if necessary.
- Serve up small, manageable portions so that your child is not overwhelmed.
- If you want to let them choose, give only two options: "Do you want Spaghetti Bolognese or vegetable curry?"
- If your child isn't gaining weight well, make sure you are offering full-fat foods and snacks (milk, yoghurts, cheese, butter), plus a pudding at each meal.
- Vitamin A, C and D supplements are recommended for all children under the age of five, and vitamin D for all over 5.

#### **5: Persevere**

Many children go through phases of fussy eating. As a parent or carer, do your best to ride out these phases. Often the less fuss you make about your child's eating, the quicker this phase will pass. Many children are naturally nervous of new things and may need to taste a new food more than 10 or even 20 times before they start to like the taste, so keep offering those foods with gentle encouragement to first touch, then sniff, then lick and then taste them.

## Food group chart- 3-day diary

It may be helpful to note down the different foods that your child eats over the next three days, based on the different food groups. Please use the Eatwell Guide below to help you place the foods into the different groups. This exercise may reassure you that your child is eating a range of foods across most, if not all food group. Alternatively, it might help you identify a particular food group in which your child may need increased exposure to. You can use this information to guide you on what types of food you would like to focus on improving your child's acceptance of. This can help guide you on specific food groups being used in messy play or having these foods as an additional offering at each mealtime for example.

Day	Carbohydrates	Protein	Vegetables	Fruit	Dairy
1					
2					
3					

# Eatwell Guide

Check the label on packaged foods

Each serving (150g) contains

Energy	Fat	Saturated	Sugars	Salt
1048kJ 250kcal	3.0g	1.3g	34g	0.9g
	LOW	LOW	HIGH	MED
13%	4%	7%	38%	15%

of an adult's reference intake  
Typical values (as sold) per 100g: 697kJ/ 167kcal

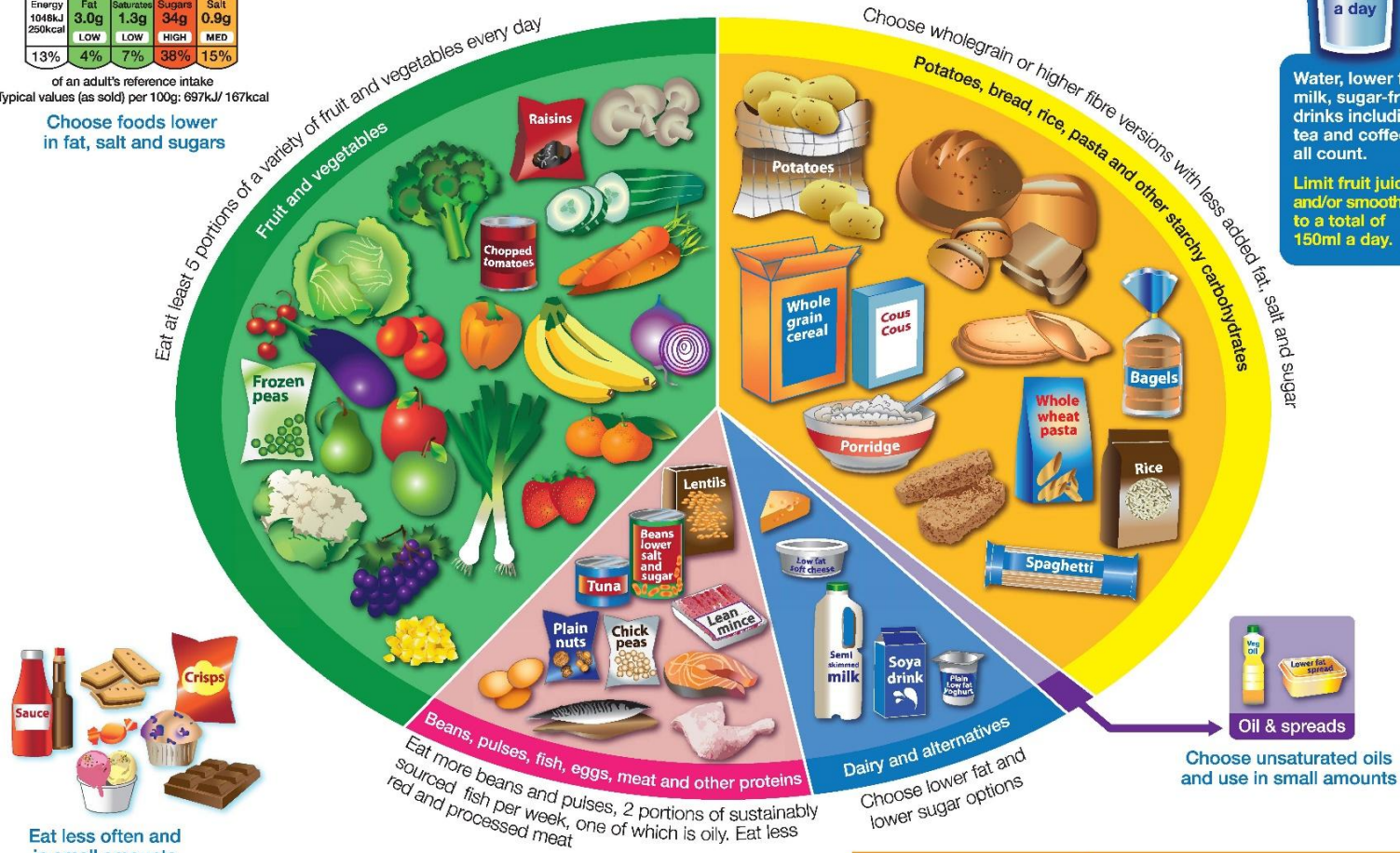
Choose foods lower  
in fat, salt and sugars

Use the Eatwell Guide to help you get a balance of healthier and more sustainable food. It shows how much of what you eat overall should come from each food group.



Water, lower fat milk, sugar-free drinks including tea and coffee all count.

Limit fruit juice and/or smoothies to a total of 150ml a day.



Per day 2000kcal 2500kcal = ALL FOOD + ALL DRINKS

Source: Public Health England in association with the Welsh Government, Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland

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