

Patient information

Toddler food refusal

This dietary advice sheet gives some general information to help you make the recommended changes to your child's diet. If you need more detailed advice, or if your child is following a special diet that makes it difficult to make these changes, please ask your doctor to refer your child to a registered dietitian.

What's the problem?

- As your child gets older, they want to be more independent. They may declare it by refusing to eat.
- Food refusal is normal in toddler's behaviour problems at meal times and tends to peak around 2 years of age.
- It can be difficult for families to get the balance right; allowing your toddler more freedom and keeping parental control.
- You may worry that your child is not eating enough to grow and be well.
- You may have family upsets caused by unpleasant battles at meal times.
- You need to know your child is growing well. Your doctor or health visitor can weigh and measure your child to check this and hopefully give you reassurance.



What you should expect...



- Your child's growth will be slower after their first year. Their appetite may be smaller and vary from day to day.
- Your toddler will probably need 3 small meals with 2 - 3 snacks in between, each day.
- It is common for young children to not eat well at one or more meals a day.

- A toddler will not starve if they miss a meal!
- Exploring and playing with food can help children to accept new foods. Some children need to see a food 6 - 7 times before trying it and taste it 10 - 15 times before liking it.
- Offer your child what the rest of the family are eating. It is a lot easier to prepare just one meal for the whole family.
- Try and take time to sit together as a family without the TV on so that you can chat.

Before you start ...

Everyone involved should be consistent in their approach to your child's food refusal including partners, grandparents and child-minders. If necessary, have a family discussion and agree an action plan!

Managing the behaviour

“To get your child to behave as you would like them to, you need to praise the behaviours you like, and ignore the behaviours you don't like.”

All children love attention and mealtimes are a great place to get this! Children quickly learn that if they don't eat, they often get more attention from you, even if you are cross or annoyed. Try to ignore them when they are not eating and praise them when they are eating.

Managing meal times

- Get your child to help prepare the family meal e.g. set the table, wash the vegetables or mix the food.
- Use brightly coloured plates and cups and easy to hold finger foods.
- If necessary, aim first to get your child to stay seated at the table for the family meal.
- Give your child a small helping, they can always have more. It's great for your child to feel they have finished what's on their plate, even if it is 3 mouthfuls! Then offer seconds.
- Try to keep meal times at more or less the same time each day.



- Set a 20-minute time limit for the first course – do not allow any more time than this.
- Offer a second course regardless if your child has eaten the first course but keep to healthy options such as yogurt, fruit – the second course.
- Focus on the good things your child is doing – praise them for sitting nicely at the table. Try not to worry about what they are not eating.
- Ignore them, even avoid eye contact when they behave in a way you do not like unless their behaviour becomes extreme, and needs to be dealt with.
- Stay calm and don't get upset if your child hasn't eaten (outwardly at least!).
- Gentle encouragement is OK, but never force feed your child.

Setting an example

“How can a child be **expected** to eat vegetables if daddy doesn't eat them?” Parents should set a good example for a child to learn good meal time habits.

Give your child some control

- Allow your toddler to feed themselves as much as possible. Prepare foods that are easy to chew and easy to pick up with fingers or put onto a spoon or fork so that toddlers can feed themselves without help.
- Give them a maximum of two meal choices as too many options will be confusing to them. Once they have decided on one, don't then offer the second.

Force feeding

Never force-feed a child! Forcing your child to eat can often lead to wrong associations with food.

Bribery and negotiations

Don't negotiate with your toddler where food is concerned. You are the parent. Stay calm and stay in control!

Stop yourself if you are saying:

“Oh dear, you haven't eaten your meal, what can I cook you instead?”

Your child learns to get the foods they want by not eating family foods. If your child doesn't eat the family meal, never offer an alternative.

“You only get your pudding if you eat all your vegetables”

Your child thinks: “Vegetables are so bad that you need a reward to have eaten them!”

“If you are good I will give you a chocolate” Don't calm your child down by using treat food, otherwise your child will learn to misbehave to get what they want. Reward your child with attention, for example a trip to the park, going out as a family or playing a game together rather than with food.

The drink problem!

Some toddlers will fill up on milk and squash rather than eat. Toddlers that are refusing to eat may be drinking too much during the day. Don't leave drinks out for your toddler to continually help themselves.

Here's a guide for how much fluid a child needs:

Milk

- Children need a maximum of 1 pint (568ml) per day.
- If your child is drinking more than this, limit the amount of milk to 1 pint each day.

Other fluids

- The best choice is water.
- If they drink squash or fruit juice, gradually make it more dilute until they are drinking water.
- Offer your child 5 to 8 drinks at set times **after** meals and snacks. This will vary depending on how hot the weather is, how active they are and how much milk they have had to drink. Don't allow a drink for at least one hour before a meal.
- Encourage them to sit down while they are having their drink. Children from 6 months onwards should be offered a cup or beaker to drink from. By 12 months a bottle should be phased out. This is to help reduce toddler tooth decay.

Trying new foods

- Don't give up, keep on trying! Toddlers constantly change their minds. It can take 15 - 20 times of trying a food for a child to accept it.

- Introduce new foods one at a time. Offer very small amounts at first. Offer the new food with foods your child likes.
- Having meal times with other children helps get your toddler to try new foods.
- Children have likes and dislikes; try not to insist that children eat foods they really don't like.

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Useful links

<https://www.childfeedingguide.co.uk/>

<https://www.henry.org.uk/fussyeating>

www.infantandtoddlerforum.org/toddlers-to-preschool/fussy-eating/how-to-manage-fussy-toddlers

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