

Picky Eaters

Definition

The peak time for picky eating is the toddler or preschool years. A picky eater:

- complains about or refuses specific foods, especially vegetables and meats
- pushes foods around the plate
- hides foods or gives them to a pet under the table
- eats enough total foods and calories per day.

Cause

Children of all ages (and adults) commonly have a few food dislikes. Sometimes children dislike foods because of their color, but more often it's because they are difficult to chew. Children accept tender meats better than tough ones, and well-cooked vegetables better than raw. Some children are repulsed by foods with a bitter taste. Occasionally a child who gags on large pieces of all foods has large tonsils that make it difficult to swallow.

Expected Outcome

Most children who are picky eaters will try new foods in the school years because of peer pressure. The voracious appetite during the adolescent years also increases the willingness to experiment. If you try to force your child to eat a food he doesn't like, he may gag or even vomit. Force feedings always interfere with the normal pleasure of eating and eventually decrease the appetite.

Living with a Picky or Finicky Eater

- **Try to prepare a main dish that everyone likes.** Try to avoid any unusual main dish that your child strongly dislikes. Some children don't like foods that are mixed together, such as casseroles. Try reintroducing such dishes when your child is older.
- **Allow occasional substitutes for the main dish.** If your child refuses to eat the main dish and this is an unusual request, you may allow a substitute dish. An acceptable substitute would be breakfast cereal or a simple sandwich the child prepares for himself. Never become a short-order cook and prepare any extra foods for mealtime. The child should know that you expect him to learn to eat the main dish that has been prepared for the family.
- **Respect any strong food dislikes.** If your child has a few strong food dislikes (especially any food that makes her gag), do not serve that food to her when it's prepared as part of the family meal. Never pressure your child to eat all foods. It will only lead to a power struggle, gagging, or even vomiting.
- **Don't worry about vegetables, just encourage more fruits.** Because vegetables tend to be hard to chew and some of them are bitter, they are commonly rejected by children and even by many adults. Keep in mind that fruits and vegetables are from the same food group. There are no essential vegetables. Vegetables can be entirely replaced by fruits without any nutritional harm to your child. This is not a health issue. Don't make your child feel guilty about avoiding some vegetables.
- **Don't allow complaining about food at mealtimes.** Have a rule that it's okay to decline a serving of a particular food or to push it to the side of the plate. But complaining about it is unacceptable.
- **Ask your child to taste new foods.** Many tastes are acquired. Your child may eventually learn that she likes a food she initially refuses. For some picky eaters, it may take seeing other people eat a certain food 10 times before they're even

willing to taste it, and another 10 times of tasting it before they develop a liking for it. Don't try to rush this normal process of adapting to new foods. Trying to force a child to eat one bite of a food per year of age is not helpful with most picky eaters. Instead, it's better to trust them when they say that they have tasted the food in question.

- **Don't argue about dessert.** An unnecessary area of friction for picky eaters is a rule that if you don't clean your plate, you can't have any dessert. Since desserts are not necessarily harmful, a better approach is to allow your child one serving of dessert regardless of what she eats. However, there are no seconds on dessert for children who don't eat an adequate amount of the main course. Desserts don't have to be sweets; they can be nutritious desserts such as fruit. Don't extend mealtime. Don't keep your child sitting at the dinner table after the rest of the family is done. This will only cause your child to develop unpleasant associations with mealtime.
- **Keep mealtimes pleasant.** Make it an important family event. Draw your children into friendly conversation. Tell them what's happened to you today and ask about their day. Talk about fun subjects unrelated to food. Avoid making it a time for criticism or struggle over control.
- **Avoid conversation about eating at any time.** Don't discuss what your child eats in your child's presence. Trust your child's appetite to look after your child's caloric needs. Also don't give praise for appropriate eating. Don't give bribes or rewards for meeting your eating expectations. Children should eat to satisfy their appetite, not to please the parent. Occasionally you might praise your child for trying a new food that he does not like the taste or texture of.
- **All meals should all be eaten at the table.** Do not eat in front of the TV.
- **Consider giving your child a daily vitamin-mineral supplement.** Although vitamins are probably unnecessary for most of us, they are not harmful in normal amounts and may allow you to relax more about your child's eating patterns.

IMPORTANT: As a parent you should focus on the "**What** (=healthy food served), **where** (=at the table) and **when** (=regular mealtime schedules)" of meals and leave the "**how much**" up to your child.