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## 5 Tips to Handle Your Picky Eater

Yuck! Gross! Ew! If the sweet symphonies of "Mom, I don't like this" or "Dad, I don't like that" sound all too familiar to your family, you've got a picky eater on your hands.

Children can have a variety of eating challenges, and often it's extremely difficult for parents to know how to navigate the behaviors involved.

It can also be concerning if your child isn't gaining weight because of his or her selective habits. If this is of concern, don't despair. You can take steps – at home and with the help of your primary care provider or a registered dietitian – to help combat the issue.

Research shows it often takes up to 10 or more exposures to develop a taste for a new food. Many people think this relates to fruits and vegetables, but children can be selective about any foods or whole food groups. So how do we recommend encouraging the children to try a food 10 times?



- 1. Set meal and snack times.** Establishing regular times for meals and snacks addresses behavior change for children. Young kids are very smart! If they skip dinner and ask for a snack an hour later (healthy or not) – and are given one time and time again – they will likely continue with this pattern. The goal is to establish the expectations that meals and snacks happen around a certain time, and that's when the food is offered. This allows children to actually be hungry when it comes time to eat. Family meals, seated at the kitchen table, are most important, so be sure to incorporate family means whenever possible.
- 2. Avoid short order cooking.** Let's face it: Despite how delicious your meals may be, your home is not a five-star restaurant serving multiple courses. Therefore, there's no reason to cook more than one meal for your family. Provide a variety of foods on the plate, and allow the kids to make choices about what's served. It's OK to cook foods you know your kids like, but they should not have the final say on all the components of the family meal.

- 3. Expose kids to new foods in different ways.** If a child doesn't like a food one way, he or she may like it another way. For example, your child may dislike steamed broccoli, but may love crunchy, roasted broccoli seasoned with olive oil and spices. It's also best to rotate the types of food provided to help avoid monotony and food jags — when a child being stuck on one food item meal after meal.
- 4. Give your kids autonomy.** Children are shown to eat food more when they have a hand in choosing or preparing it. So get creative and try planting a garden at home. This will allow kids to learn about the process from start to finish — and they may be more inclined to eat their creation. They can also get involved in recipe development. Tip: Each week, choose one new food and have the kiddos come up with three different recipes that incorporate that item.
- 5. Don't give up.** If Johnny says no to quinoa and is never given quinoa again, he won't learn to develop a taste for it — which it's why it's important to be persistent. And you can still make it fun! Use sticker "bite charts" to track your child's progress, and give a non-food related reward upon completion. And do your best to keep calm during this process. Food should be enjoyable, and we want to keep it that way. If a child doesn't want to finish everything on his or her plate, that's OK. Children will learn to self-regulate hunger and fullness while exploring new foods.

Let's be honest: It's not just children who can be picky — adults can be, too. As parents, it's crucial to set a good example for your children. It's just not feasible expect them to try a new food if the adult role models in their lives won't do so, as well.

So what do you do if your child has tried a food 10 times and still dislikes it? My best piece of advice is to let it be.

Simply put: There are foods that kids will either like or dislike. We don't expect them to love every vegetable grown from the earth, but we do hope they'll try and find at least a few things they enjoy the taste of.

And don't worry if your child is occasionally picky; this is a natural part of development. However, if your child continues to have severe food aversions or cuts out whole food groups, or if you sense any anxiety with trying new foods, it may be beneficial to look for additional support.

Talk to your health care provider for a referral to a behavior health specialist or feeding program that will work to get through whatever barriers may be present.

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