

Outstanding Care,
Compassionate People,
Healthier Communities



Sherwood Forest Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Autism and diet

Information for patients/parents/guardians/carers



Although food refusal and selective eating can be very worrying, most children manage to choose foods from different food groups and as a result grow well without suffering the effects of being deficient in any nutrients.

Your dietitian will take a diet history to establish which food groups your child is eating from and assess if there is a risk of nutritional deficiencies or growth concerns.

Helpful tips around meal and snack times:



- Environment is important.
- Think about your child's preferred environment at mealtimes and try to replicate this whether at home or school.
- Consider seating (is a cushion needed?), utensils, noise, lighting, distractions, other people present.
- Some children may prefer some background noise, such as from the radio, tablet, music, and some may not.
- Try to stay calm at mealtimes.
- Never force your child to eat.
- Avoid commenting on any uneaten food.
- After approximately 20 minutes take the first course away and offer a second course.
- Offer food approximately every two hours, aiming for three meals daily and snacks in a structured approach.
- Involve your child in mealtime routines with food preparation, shopping before, and table setting. They could also help you plan a menu for the next week if age appropriate.

Ideas to support diet expansion:

- Food chaining – a slightly different version of the food can be offered with a different size, or brand.
- Please refer to the NHS webinar on sensory feeding difficulties: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhayg1qhQs8>
- Never give up on introducing new foods.



- You may find your child prefers a certain colour food, flavour, and texture. Slowly introducing a food that is similar can be helpful for increased food exposures and help progress towards more variety. Your dietitian can help with suggestions of similar foods to trial.
- Messy play – please refer to the sensory toolkit for ideas: <https://sensoryplaytoolkit.weebly.com/>



Constipation and reflux

These can affect appetite and may need medical treatment.

If fibre and fluid intake is insufficient, slight adjustments in diet can be helpful, e.g. for a child who likes different crisps or crackers due to textures, try offering wholegrain crackers, higher fibre crisp brands or popcorn. Different flavours can be tried for fluids and also an increase in liquid foods, for example yoghurt, jellies, soups, ice cream or ice lollies, custard and fruit.

Concerns with weight

Underweight:

- Increasing calorie intake by adding extra fats and sugars into the diet can be helpful. Your dietitian can discuss food fortification options of the current diet but usually adding extra butter/oils/nut butters/other full fat dairy such as yoghurts, cheeses and milk will help.
- Sending extra portions of the foods that your child will eat to have as snacks at school will aid to increase intake.
- Your dietitian will discuss if nutritional supplements may be needed.

Overweight:

- Try to create a structured mealtime routine serving three meals daily and planned snack times.
- Look at ways of reducing foods, e.g. a smaller plate (especially sugary and fatty foods).
- When offering favourite foods offer these in the standard recommended portion size for age, please see below links for resources:
 - Infant and Toddler Forum: <https://infantandtoddlerforum.org/toddlers-to-preschool/portion-sizes-for-toddlers/toddler-portion-sizes-table/>
 - Eating well for 5-11 year olds: <https://www.cwt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CHEW-5-11Years-PracticalGuide.pdf>
 - Autism and diet: <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/autism-diet.html>

- Aim to refuse constant demands for foods.
- Encourage a minimum of 60 minutes of activity daily if your child over five years old. For under-fives encourage 180 minutes a day.



Nutritional deficiencies

Children with very limited diets can be at risk for deficiencies of calcium, protein, Vitamins A, B2, B12, D as well as biotin, folate, iron and zinc.

A multivitamin and mineral supplement with iron can be helpful to bridge the gap.

There are a variety of different types of multivitamins in the form of liquids, chews, and sprinkles.

Your dietitian may also suggest a nutritional analysis of dietary intake and certain blood results if there are concerns identified during the diet history. A food diary will be issued and three days intake requested.

Probiotics

A probiotic could help relieve gut symptoms; however, the evidence is limited to advise on a specific probiotic for autism in children. If you are considering trialling a specific product please discuss this with your dietitian who can advise. Trialling the product for a minimum of four to six weeks at the dose recommended by the manufacturer should help to see if there is any benefit.



Gluten and casein free diets (the primary protein in cow's milk)

It is recommended that exclusion diets (such as gluten and casein free diets) should not be used as an intervention for the management of core features of autism in children and young people. More research is needed in this area.

If you do feel that this is something you'd like to try, bear in mind that it can be restrictive but the dietitians will support you to ensure the diet is nutritionally balanced.



Further sources of information

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions

Our website: www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk

Patient Experience Team (PET)

PET is available to help with any of your compliments, concerns or complaints, and will ensure a prompt and efficient service.

King's Mill Hospital: 01623 672222

Newark Hospital: 01636 685692

Email: sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net

If you would like this information in an alternative format, for example large print or easy read, or if you need help with communicating with us, for example because you use British Sign Language, please let us know. You can call the Patient Experience Team on 01623 672222 or email sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net.



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