

My Child Is Overeating

Advice for Parents of Children with Autism

As a parent, you will know that children can be fussy eaters and that stubbornness over certain foods is very common. For children with autism (and their parents) this can become a real problem.

Eating a healthy diet is a really important part of physical wellbeing – we need it in order to grow, fight off illness and be healthy and strong. If your child isn't eating well, they may not be able to function at an optimum level and this can lead to problems both at home and at school.

Some autistic children have a very limited diet with little variation. They may struggle to cope with the smell, texture and taste of particular foods and simply avoid eating them. Others may struggle to control their appetite and overeat.

Of course, every child is different but maybe you recognise some of these issues:

- Tantrums and meltdowns at mealtimes.
- Getting anxious over new foods – whether they're being eaten by someone else, seen in a supermarket, or just present in the home.
- Being nauseated by the smell of some foods, or when eating a new food (if they can be convinced to try it).
- Refusing to eat items from one or more food groups, such as avoiding dairy or eating only sugar-rich foods.
- Refusing to eat certain textures, such as crunchy foods or soft foods.
- Developing an obsession with particular flavours – often salty or sweet – which makes a healthy and balanced diet much harder to follow.
- Wanting either very strong tasting or very bland food.
- Not wanting different foods on the plate to come into contact with each other.

- Needing foods to be a specific colour (often brown or beige)
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Why Is My Child Overeating?

There are many reasons why a child overeats. A good starting point is for you to keep an eye on the types of food they like and dislike. Try to work out whether it is the quantity or variety (or both) of food eaten which causes a problem for your child. Once you've done this, you can identify what underlying problems, or sensory issues, may be involved.

Start by keeping a note of what your child is eating, and when. Keeping a food diary can make you aware of the extent of the issue: perhaps your child is eating more or less than you first thought.

Ask yourself some questions:

- What did they eat?
- When did they eat?
- Where did they eat?
- Who were they with?
- How much did they eat?

This will give you an idea of what the issues are and help you to support your child in overcoming them.



What Can I Do?

Talk to your child and help them understand why they need food. Be calm, consistent and clear in what it is you are telling your child.

Use **social stories** to help you explain the following:

- We need food for fuel to give us energy so that we can go to school and play with our friends.
- We need to eat different food groups in order to have a healthy diet in order to grow and strengthen.
- If we don't eat properly, we can become tired and sick.
- Different foods have different vitamins and minerals in them and they help us stay healthy.
- Eating too much of certain foods can lead to us putting on weight.

Use **pictures** of different foods and explain to your child what each of them is and how they can help stay healthy.

Many autistic children need **routine** and **repetition**. They may need to have meals at the same time every day, sitting in the same place at the table, or always use the same plate or cutlery.

When you find it difficult to communicate with other people, it can be difficult to choose what you'd like to eat and let other people know. It's also hard to express that you're hungry or that you've had enough. Develop a subtle cue, or use visual aids such as gauges and pictures, for your child to let you know how they're feeling non-verbally.

Some children with autism eat for sensory stimulation or self-soothing. They can be hyper or under sensitive to certain sensations and this is also true with food. Have a supply of healthy food like carrot sticks, fresh fruit, and low fat yoghurts. These may be useful in giving your child the sensory stimulation that they need. Or have a sensory chewy toy that your child can bite: chewy wrist bands, necklaces and other toys that are especially designed for children with autism are available.

Here are some more handy tips:

- It can help to have some low-fat, low-energy snacks handy, so that he's not too full by the next meal.
- Be aware of your child's needs and whether they have hyper or under sensitivity.
- Try adjusting food to improve the sensory impact. Maybe you could add purée to it or try using food colouring? Try making healthy smoothies if your child is happy with the taste and texture.
- Sometimes children think they're hungry when they're really just thirsty. Make sure that your child drinks plenty of water throughout the day, between mealtimes.
- Keeping 'problem' or snack foods out of reach can help your child to snack less.
- If your child feels hungry when they are bored, keep them occupied at trigger times during the day.
- Try to limit how much food you put on your child's plate, and how much food is in sight.
- Lead an active lifestyle – get involved in sports and encourage your child to exercise.

Notice, praise and reward your child when they make healthy choices or they do not snack between meals. A good time to praise them is when you sit down to eat rather than bringing it up at other times when they will be reminded of food.

Remember:

You are not alone. If food and eating become too much of an issue speak to your health visitor or doctor or contact a local autism support group.

