

<https://www.gosh.nhs.uk/conditions-and-treatments/general-health-advice/food-and-diet/fussy-eaters/>

## Fussy eaters



It's natural to worry and assume something must be wrong when your child seems to lose interest in food. In fact, this is a stage that many toddlers go through. Up to a third of children around the age of two could be described as fussy eaters.

Most grow out of it and begin to accept a wider range of food in time. But very occasionally there might be an underlying problem that's contributing to a sudden loss of appetite.

## Loss of appetite

There are several possible explanations for a toddler's sudden lack of interest in food. Around the end of the first year, a child's growth rate slows down. This might mean their appetite has decreased.

They may also be experiencing a growing sense of independence. You may have noticed they are less co-operative in other areas – for instance about getting dressed or putting their shoes on. Refusing food is a way of asserting themselves.

Also, they may be engrossed in learning new skills, and less keen to stop what they're doing to eat.

Feedback

## Healthy eating

It's important to continue offering a wide variety of healthy foods. Setting good eating patterns at this stage will stand your child in good stead for the rest of their life.

Try the following:

- Stick to a routine with three meals a day: breakfast, lunch and tea, with healthy snacks mid morning and mid afternoon. Make sure they sit in the same place to eat as often as possible, to help them feel comfortable and secure.
- Offer food when they are most likely to be hungry. Some children are starving as soon as they wake up, while others need longer to work up an appetite.
- Present simple, healthy food. Don't ask them what they want – at two, they won't know. Give small portions, offer praise when it's finished, then offer more. Give tried and tested foods alongside anything that is new so that the meal looks familiar. Studies have shown that some toddlers need to be given a new food more than ten times before they will accept it.

- Eat together. This makes mealtimes more enjoyable and sociable. Ask for a spoonful of your child's food, then offer them yours. Show your enjoyment by saying 'yummy' and giving lots of smiles – this will boost their confidence. Invite their friends round for meals. Toddlers will often accept new foods if eating with other children who like and enjoy that particular food.
- Encourage them to feed themselves. You might face a mess, but they may well eat more if they have more control. Finger foods like sandwiches, cheese on crackers, breadsticks and hummus, small sausages, vegetable sticks, pieces of fruit, fish fingers or a few chips are favourites with toddlers.
- If your child will eat only a few foods, build on these. For instance if they like potato, try different types such as mash and roast potatoes. If they reject something they previously enjoyed, don't worry. Introduce it again later.
- Try to keep your cool even if a meal hasn't been eaten. If you are anxious and tense, your child will pick up on this and it could make the situation worse. So don't make a fuss – just take the plate away without comment.

## When to see the doctor

Try not to worry even if your child's diet does seem very limited. Research shows that toddlers almost always manage to eat the right balance of nutrients needed for healthy growth and development.

But if your child is losing weight, seems lethargic, weak and/or irritable, or is suffering from fever, see your doctor.

Tests might be needed to rule out any underlying problem such as anaemia, caused by lack of dietary iron.

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