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The picky eater

What is a picky eater?

- A picky eater complains about or refuses many foods, especially vegetables and meats.
- A picky eater pushes these foods around the plate or "stores" them in his mouth.
- Peak age for this behavior is toddler (1-3) or preschool (4-5) years.
- A picky eater eats enough total calories each day (he grows).

Cause

Children of all ages (and adults) commonly have a few food dislikes. Sometimes these foods are disliked because of their color, but more commonly it's because they are difficult to chew. Tender meats are better accepted than tough ones, as are well-cooked vegetables. Some children are repulsed by foods with a bitter taste. Others insist upon baby food well past the age when most children have moved on to table food.

Expected Outcome

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

Living with the picky eater

- Try to prepare a 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. These can be reintroduced later.
- Respect any strong food dislikes. If your child has a few strong food dislikes (especially any food that makes him gag), he should not be served that food when it's prepared as part of the family meal. Never pressure him to eat all foods. It will only lead to a power struggle, gagging, or even vomiting.
- If he refuses vegetables, 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. This is not a health issue. Don't make him feel guilty about avoiding some vegetables.

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- Don't make your home into a "diner" and prepare extra foods for mealtime. A child should know that we expect him to learn to eat the main dish that has been prepared for the family. If he refuses this, don't keep resorting to one of his few favorites; he'll soon learn that if he waits, mommy will eventually bring around one of his favorites (just like the waitress in the diner). It's better for him to skip a meal -- or two -- and get really hungry than it is for you to make your kitchen his own personal diner.
- Ask your child to "taste" new foods. Many tastes are acquired. He may eventually learn that he likes a food he initially refused. 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.
- Allow your child to eat pureed foods and baby foods. Some children prefer the smoothness of pureed foods to more solid foods. Remember, once food has been chewed, it's all baby food anyway. Solid food and baby food have the same nutritional benefits.
- Don't extend mealtime. Don't keep a child sitting at the dinner table after the rest of the family is done. This will only cause him to develop unpleasant associations with mealtime.
- Avoid conversations about eating. Trust the appetite center to look after your child's caloric needs -- he IS a big boy! Also, don't give bribes or rewards for meeting your eating expectations. Children should eat to satisfy their appetite, not to please a parent. Occasionally a child can be praised for trying a new food although he does not like its taste or texture.
- Avoid frequent snacks, especially near mealtime, and don't fill him up on juices and juice drinks.
- Consider getting your child off the bottle. Although you may feel that, without his 32 ounces of milk each day he'll starve, the truth is that once he's been off the bottle for a few months, he'll become hungrier for more foods.



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