

# Picky Eater

## Definition

- A picky eater refuses certain foods. He won't try new foods.
- Vegetables and meats are the most common ones
- You are not concerned about how much he eats or his appetite
- He may complain or whine about what is served
- He can make mealtime unpleasant for his entire family

## Health Information

### Cause

- Most young children dislike foods with a bitter or spicy taste. This is normal.
- It is also normal for children to dislike foods that are difficult to chew.
- Picky eaters however dislike many foods that are easy to eat.
- Severe picky eaters may only have 5 or 10 foods in their diet. They may want the same food for dinner every night. Macaroni and cheese is a favorite. Others are chicken nuggets and fries.
- The main cause is a stubborn or rigid personality. They don't like change.

### What to Expect

- Most children who are picky eaters will improve with time. Some will grow out of it.
- They start trying new foods during the early school years because of peer pressure. They try new foods at camp because they are hungry. They try new foods during the teen years because of growth spurts.
- Don't try to force your child to eat a food he doesn't like. If you do, the problem will last longer.

## Care Advice

- 1. Allow Substitutes for the Main Dish Once in a While:**
  - If your child refuses to eat the main dish, allow a substitute dish. Acceptable ones are breakfast cereal, yogurt or a simple sandwich.
  - If the only meat he will eat is chicken, keep some in the fridge. It can be a protein source.
  - Never become a short-order cook or prepare any special foods for mealtime.
- 2. Don't Worry about Vegetables - Offer More Fruits:**
  - Keep in mind that fruits and vegetables are from the same food group.
  - So, just encourage more kinds of fruits.
  - There are no essential vegetables. Mainly serve the vegetables he likes.
  - Vegetables can be largely replaced by fruits without any harm to your child's nutrition.
  - Another option is to offer blended juices. A tasty one is orange-carrot juice.
- 3. Encourage Your Child to Taste New Foods:**
  - Research shows many tastes are acquired. It may take tasting a new food 10 times before a child starts to like it.
  - Trying to force a child to eat one bite of a food per year of age is not helpful with most picky eaters.
  - Just ask your child to taste it. Then, trust him when he says he has.
  - Request 2 "tastes" the next time you serve that food.

4. **Avoid Pressure or Punishment at Mealtime:**
  - Never pressure your child to eat all foods.
  - Never punish your child for refusing to take one bite of a new food.
  - Also, avoid begging and bargaining.
  - If your child is stubborn, pressure around eating will make it worse. It can progress to a power struggle. This in turn prolongs picky eating.
5. **Don't Argue about Dessert:**
  - Some parents say that if you don't clean your plate, you can't have dessert. This is an unnecessary area of friction for picky eaters.
  - Desserts are not necessarily harmful.
  - Allow your child one serving of desert regardless of what she eats.
  - Desserts don't have to be sweets. They can be nutritious desserts such as fruit.
6. **Don't Extend Mealtime:**
  - Don't keep your child sitting at the dinner table after everyone else is done.
7. **Don't Allow Complaining about Food at Mealtimes:**
  - Have a rule that it's okay to decline a serving of a particular food. Your child can also push it to the side of the plate.
  - But, complaining or whining about it is not permitted.
  - Give 1 warning.
  - If whining recurs, send your child away from the eating area for 5 minutes.
8. **Keep Mealtime Pleasant:**
  - Make it an important family event.
  - Draw your children into friendly conversation.
  - Tell them what's happened to you today and ask about their day.
  - Talk about fun subjects.
  - Don't talk about what or how much people are eating.
  - Children should eat to satisfy their appetite, not to please the parent.
  - If your mealtimes are a battleground, change your expectations.
9. **Give Your Child a Daily Vitamin:**
  - Ideally, your child should eat at least 1 serving of meat per day.
  - If they aren't, give a multivitamin with iron. This will prevent iron deficiency anemia.
  - This will allow you to worry less about your child's nutrition and health.

## Call Your Doctor If

- Your child is losing weight
- Your child gags on or vomits certain foods
- You have other questions or concerns

### Pediatric Care Advice

**Author:** Barton Schmitt MD, FAAP

**Copyright 2000-2023** Schmitt Pediatric Guidelines LLC

**Disclaimer:** This health information is for educational purposes only. You the reader assume full responsibility for how you choose to use it. The information contained in this handout should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. Listing of any resources does not imply an endorsement.