

Food Selectivity

What is Food Selectivity?

Food selectivity is the consumption of an abnormally limited variety of food. Technically, any child who eats fewer foods than normal and who avoids any foods could be called food selective. However, we usually reserve this term for children who avoid one or more entire food groups.

The four food groups as we define them are:

- 1) Cereals, grains, and starches
- 2) Protein foods (meats, eggs, cheese, legumes)
- 3) Fruits and vegetables
- 4) Dairy products.

What is the difference between a “Picky” Eater and a “Selective” Eater?

Picky eaters may eat a limited number of foods but they eat at least one or two foods from each food group. They have more balanced diets than selective eaters.

Selective eaters have aversions to many more foods, or have unusual aversions. For example, selective eaters may avoid all cereals, all meats, all cold foods, all foods with red color, all crunchy foods, all fruits and vegetables, etc. A child who eats no more than 5 foods would also be considered a selective eater.

A typical food selective diet might include pizza, chicken nuggets, milk, and nothing else.

What causes food selectivity?

- History or tendency toward digestive problems such as reflux
- Difficult medical history that affected interest in or ability to eat
- Chronic constipation
- Altered or heightened sensory perceptions of food
- Sensory integration problems
- Certain medical or genetic conditions—for example, autism
- Medications—some can alter sense of taste or texture
- Inadvertent history of parental reinforcement of food selectivity behaviors

Are There Any Food Groups That Can Be Avoided Without Compromising Health?

Yes: dairy products. The nutrients in dairy products can be found in the other three food groups and from sunlight (for adequate vitamin D). But dairy products are excellent sources of certain nutrients. To get the same amount of these nutrients from other foods, children must eat a healthy variety of other foods. They must also have a good source for vitamin D: either regular exposure to sunlight, a vitamin supplement, or a vitamin D enriched milk substitute.

A child who does not eat dairy products and also does not eat a healthy variety of other foods IS going to be at risk for vitamin deficiencies.

Are there Any Other Food Groups That Can Be Avoided Without Compromising Health?

No other food group can be avoided without compromising health, but there are individual foods that can be avoided without compromising health. Meats, for example, can be avoided as long as there are other good sources of protein present in the diet. A child who does not eat fruits but does eat many vegetables may still receive adequate nutrition. A child who avoids bread but eats other cereals, grains or starchy foods may still meet his carbohydrate needs.

How Do You Help A Food Selective Child Overcome Her Selectivity?

First, we determine what foods and nutrients are missing from the diet and develop a list of foods we would like the child to start eating. These include new foods and foods the child used to eat. Then we use behavioral psychology strategies to introduce these foods.

How Do You Help A Picky Eater Overcome His “Pickiness?”

Through patience and repetition. Continue to offer the food. Try different presentations and recipes (raw versus cooked, plain versus casserole, etc). Praise and reward the child when he does try a new food. However, don't expect a child to eat foods you don't eat!

What About “Bad” Diets and “Pickiness” in Older Children and Teenagers?

For older children and teenagers, continue to make healthy foods available and encourage your child to eat properly.

While teenagers may eat a lot of “junk” foods, studies have shown that when parents continue to model good eating behavior and healthy diets and continue to provide their teenagers with healthy foods, those teens eat significantly more fruits and vegetables and other “good” foods than their peers.

Does Food Selectivity Lead to Eating Disorders?

No, the two conditions are not related. Children with eating disorders have an obsession with appearance and body weight. Children with food selectivity are not concerned with appearance or weight. They find something about the actual experience of eating unpleasant, uncomfortable or frightening. Once this is overcome, they will eat.

WVU-CED Feeding and Swallowing Clinic
959 Hartman Run Road
Morgantown, WV 26505
Phone: (304) 293-4692 ext1148
Fax: (304) 293-7294
E-mail: mandis@hsc.wvu.edu