

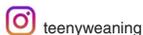
FUSSY EATING IN TODDLERS



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REFERENCES

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Fussy eating is common amongst toddlers and feeding a child can be a highly emotive experience, which can cause great parental anxiety. Parents need to be better informed about strategies to help prevent negative consequences of fussy eating for both families and future health.

Eating preferences and patterns during the toddler years are strongly associated with those later in life and so toddler eating habits may have important implications on not only a child's current health, but also on their future health. There are many strategies to help overcome fussy eating, but there are behaviours that can make it worse.

Currently there is no universal definition for fussy eating, or an agreement on the best tool to identify it, making it difficult to compare studies.¹ The most accepted definition is that 'picky/fussy eaters are usually defined as children who consume an inadequate variety of foods through rejection of foods that are familiar (and unfamiliar) to them'.² Neophobia; actual fear of unfamiliar foods, is distinct from fussy eating.

Most fussy eating resolves over time with the right strategies, although in a small number of cases Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) can develop. ARFID is defined as an eating or feeding disturbance resulting in persistent failure to meet appropriate nutritional or energy needs (and not caused by another disorder such as anorexia nervosa).³ This includes significant weight loss, faltering growth, major nutritional deficiency, or dependence on enteral feeding and nutritional supplements. These cases need to be identified early to enable support.^{1,4}

HOW COMMON IS FUSSY EATING?

It is difficult to identify prevalence. Most studies estimate the prevalence to be between 10%-30% of preschool/

primary age children.⁵ The UK Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), found prevalence was 10% at age 24 months, 15% at 38 months and 14% and 12% at 54 and 65 months, respectively. In other words, fussy eating appears to peak at about three years.¹ Notably, only 26% of children aged two to five years were never reported to be fussy.³

WHAT CAUSES FUSSY EATING?

It is believed that fussy eating is caused by a complex mix of child characteristics and the child-parent interaction.¹ The evolutionary theory suggests that the rejection of vegetables in particular is explained by our innate liking for sweet, salty and umami flavours over bitter and sour ones.⁶ This is considered a survival mechanism given that bitter flavours are often poisonous in the wild.

Additionally, as toddlers become more mobile, neophobia is believed to be a protective mechanism through fear of eating anything 'unsafe'.

Early feeding difficulties such as choking, vomiting or reflux can lead to fussy eating. Children with autism regularly present with selective eating due to heightened sensory sensitivity. Children with food allergies or dietary restrictions, such as those with coeliac disease, can develop selective eating through fear of contamination.³ Genetics plays a part too. The Gemini birth cohort found that both food fussiness and neophobia showed considerable heritability.⁷ Genetic variation in sensitivity to taste may also play a role.⁸ On the other hand, there is strong evidence that early food preferences are