



Picky Eating

Persons with autism or intellectual disability can have very rigid rules about their diet. They may have a narrow range of foods that they eat.



Textures and tastes can play a role in avoiding new foods. Rituals or habits may develop such as no foods can touch or needing a specific color plate.

Selective diets with a limited range of foods can cause health concerns like slow growth, vitamin deficiencies, dehydration or low diet fiber causing constipation.

Talk to your doctor about diet intake so that you can check for health problems and work together to find solutions.

Improve food variety

Change can be hard and slow but may bring long-term value. Learning to eat new foods can help teach tolerance to future changes. This process might help reduce fear of change in other areas.

- When working to add new foods, explore first what a person currently eats. Explore preferences across texture, taste, smell, appearance.
 - Textures include thin liquid, thick liquid, pudding, crunchy, chewy and mixed.
 - Tastes vary in sweet, salty, sour, bitter, spicy. Smells can be mild to strong.
- Model consistency. Use **regular household meals**.
- Avoid fighting over food. Avoid the “clean your plate” approach.
- Start with small expectations.
- When trying something new, include something familiar on the plate too.
- Take small steps. Try a look, a touch, a smell, a taste.
- Be persistent. It may take **8 to 10 trials** to accept a new food.
- Use specific praise.
 - “I like how you tried that new food.” “Great job staying in your chair at dinner!”
- Get help from a behavior therapist when you need it.



Eat fruits and vegetables

- 1) Involve your person in learning that fruits and vegetables are important for good health.
 - a. Make it a game.
 - b. Can you eat one veggie per day?
 - c. Grow your goal to two veggies and more.
- 2) Involve your person in shopping and cooking. Work on creating fun in the store and kitchen.
- 3) Model eating fruits and veggies yourself. The goal for healthy adults is 7 servings or more a day.
- 4) Use **food chaining** to gradually explore new foods. This method introduces new foods by building on foods a person already eats.
 - a. Create a chain by gradually progressing in small steps from something a person likes such as fruity drinks, candy or gelatin, to fruit snacks, to dried fruit, to fresh fruit.
 - b. If a person likes orange drink, try orange juice without pulp, then with pulp, then try a juice made with mixed fruits and veggies.
 - c. If a person likes potato chips, try banana chips, then sliced bananas.



- 5) Find ways to **add fruits and veggies into likeable foods**:
 - a. There are processed foods that already mix chicken nuggets with veggies.
 - b. Smoothies can use one or two foods that are liked and gradually blend in other veggies or fruit. Types of milk, yogurt or ice, bananas and other fruits are common ingredients.
 - c. Soups, sauces and gravies can be blended with gradual addition of veggies.
 - d. Quick breads and muffins can be made with applesauce, carrot puree, and more.



More ideas from IIDC: <https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/cell/resources/resource-card-eating.html>