

Eating Guidelines and Feeding Tips for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Like all children, children with Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) need to eat well in order to have the nutrients that they need to grow, learn and develop. Every child with ASD has a different personality and set of abilities that may affect what and how much they eat.

Children with ASD may be more sensitive to the taste, smell, texture and appearance of food and the sounds and distractions around them. This can lead to feeding problems such as picky eating and possible nutrient deficiencies.

For example, a child with autism may:

- Only eat (or avoid) foods with a certain texture (e.g. soft, smooth, puréed, or crunchy).
- Only eat (or avoid) foods with a certain colour.
- Only eat (or avoid) foods with a certain flavour (e.g. sweet, sour, bitter spicy or salty).
- Only eat a specific brand of food or food in a certain type of package.
- Mostly eat a certain type of food (e.g. starchy foods).
- Eat very hot food without worrying about burning their mouth.
- Refuse to eat new foods.
- Refuse to use certain utensils.
- Leave the table because of the smell of certain foods.
- May not be able to eat if there are too many distractions around them such as TV or noise from talking.

Outlined below are some general healthy eating guidelines and feeding tips to help you get started.



Steps you can take

Try to follow Canada's Food Guide

Children with ASD have the same nutrition needs as other children. Offer your child a variety of foods from each of the four food groups in Canada's Food Guide www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide. Each food group provides different nutrients for a well balanced diet and good health.

Try the following tips to help your child eat better: If mealtimes are a struggle, following these tips will help your child develop better eating habits.

- Keep a food diary. Write down what, where, when and how much your child eats. Notice if your child's eating habits are different when other people are around. Determine whether your child's eating habits are affected by lights, noise or distractions such as toys. Show the diary to a dietitian. With this information, you and the dietitian can look for ways to improve your child's eating behaviours.
- Stick to a routine. Have meals and snacks at about the same time every day. Try sticking pictures of a plate, glass and cutlery on the dinner table or on a place mat to help teach your child where these items are placed.
- Ask your child why he does not like to eat a certain food. Maybe the colour of the can or package is not right. Or maybe he does not like how the name of the food is spelled on the package. You may get better ideas for helping your child once you understand how your child feels about the food.
- Change one small thing at a time. Try offering a food that is similar (in taste or texture) to what your child already eats. For example, if your child likes the flavour of strawberry ice cream, try offering fresh strawberries. If your child enjoys crunchy foods, try serving apples, celery or whole grain crackers. If your child likes

peanut butter on toast, put it on an English muffin.

- Offer a choice. For example, ask your child: “Would you rather eat this food or that food today?” If the child has trouble understanding what you say, then show the different food choices or use pictures.
- Offer a new food with at least one of your child’s favourite foods. The hope is that your child will link the new food with something positive and enjoyable. Ask the dietitian or health care provider about a special approach called Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA). This approach can help your child learn to eat new foods. For more information on ABA, see the Additional Resources section.
- Take small steps when offering new foods. First try putting the new food on your child’s plate or in a different bowl beside your child. If that’s OK, then move to these next steps. For some children it may take a few days while for others it may take a few months. Ask your child to:
 - Touch the food - let him play with the food.
 - Smell the food.
 - Bring the food to his lips.
 - Touch the food with his tongue.
 - Taste the food.
 - Taste the food every day for two weeks.
- Eat together as often as possible. You are an important role model for healthy eating. Your child will eat better, learn table manners and stay at a healthier weight.
- Offer a variety of new foods. You might be surprised by the foods your child will eat. He may not like to eat white rice, but he might just love a piece of “smelly” Gorgonzola cheese!
- Give lots of rewards. Every time your child tries a new food, give a reward. It doesn’t matter if he didn’t like or eat the food. The important thing is that he tried it! Give your child a reward that he really loves, such as their favourite food, toy or activity. Hugs and praise are good too if your child enjoys them. When a child gets a

reward for trying something new, there's a better chance that he will try another new food next time. Once your child is eating that new food regularly, then you can stop giving him a reward for eating it.

- Be patient. Taking small steps will make it easier for your child to succeed and feel proud! Understand that it may take months for your child to make one small change and try a new food. Offer lots of love, praise and rewards along the way!
- Talk to a Registered Dietitian with expertise with ASD if you are concerned about your child's eating habits. She will check your child's diet and give specific tips for dealing with picky eating and other nutritional concerns.

Special consideration

Vitamin and mineral supplements have not been shown to improve symptoms of ASD. But if your child is a picky eater, he may need to take some supplements to help meet his nutrient needs. The types and amounts of supplements your child may need depends on the type and amount of food he is eating.

Always talk to your child's doctor or dietitian before giving any type of supplement to your child. Too much of some nutrients can be harmful.

Iron: Children with ASD often have low levels of iron, usually because many are picky eaters. Ask your child's doctor to check your child's iron levels regularly. If your child has low iron levels or iron deficiency, he will need to take an iron supplement to bring the levels back up to normal. Do not give your child an iron supplement unless the doctor has diagnosed an iron deficiency. Taking too many iron supplements is dangerous. Supplements can look like candies, so keep them where your child cannot reach them.

Multivitamin and Mineral Supplement: If your child has sleep problems, a daily multivitamin and mineral supplement may help. Multivitamins come in tablet or liquid form, so pick the type that your child can swallow. A supplement that contains iron may cause gastrointestinal problems such as constipation or diarrhea. Talk to your child's doctor, pharmacist or dietitian if your child has either of these

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gastrointestinal problems. See the Additional Resources section for more information about healthy bowel habits in kids.

Omega-3, Vitamin B6 and Magnesium supplements. There is not enough evidence to recommend taking these vitamin and mineral supplements to improve behavior in children with ASD.

Gluten-free and Casein-free diets

Some children with ASD may have an improvement in their symptoms when they follow a gluten-free and casein-free diet over the short term. More research is needed before these diets can be generally recommended for ASD.

Gluten and casein are two types of proteins found in foods. Gluten is the main protein naturally found in wheat and other grains such as rye, barley, triticale, kamut and spelt. Casein is the main protein naturally found in cow's milk, cheese, yogurt and ice cream.

If planned well, a gluten free or casein free diet provides all the nutrients your child needs. If you want to try a gluten-free or casein-free diet with your child, keep in mind that:

- The diets may be hard to follow by limiting the variety of foods you can offer to your child.
- Some of the foods that you are limiting may be ones that your child enjoys.
- Gluten-free and casein-free foods cost more than “regular” foods.
- Wheat-based breads and pastas are enriched with iron and B vitamins, but gluten-free foods are not enriched. Dairy foods are excellent sources of calcium. Therefore, your child may not be getting enough of these nutrients if he/she follows a gluten-free, casein-free diet.

All of these factors can make it difficult for your child, especially a picky eater, to get enough nutrients that he needs. Ask a dietitian to help you plan gluten-free and casein-free diets to make sure that your child gets enough vitamins and minerals every day.



Additional Resources

- Autism Society Canada www.autismsocietycanada.ca.
- Autism Canada Foundation www.autismcanada.org
- The Canadian Celiac Association www.celiac.ca/index.php (for information about gluten and gluten-free diets)

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