

Fussy eating can manifest in a whole range of different forms and to varying degrees. Sometimes referred to as, picky, faddy, choosy eating¹ or food neophobia (a fear of eating new foods) the outcome tends to be the same - food gets turned away. Whatever we call it, it really can make a meal out of mealtimes. So here are a few ways to first identify a little fussy foodie.

What is fussy eating?

Regrettably there is no single widely accepted definition of fussy eating¹ Research^{2,3} shows that fussy eating tends to have a few different faces. These are summarised in Table 1 and can help to indicate whether there may be a fussy eater in the house.

Table 1: Signs of a Fussy Foodie.

Fussy children may:

Eat a different meal to the rest of the family.

Eat slowly.

Have a clear dislike towards new foods.

Have a limited intake of foods.

Have a limited variety of foods.

Have a low enjoyment for foods.

Trigger extra stress at the family table.



If you notice any of these signs then try not to worry too much. Science shows that the turning away of certain foods is actually an ingrained evolutionary response to help protect children from eating potentially harmful substances⁴ In our world today, foods are generally safe to eat and so food neophobia can become an unwelcome problem for many parents.

Most of us tend to worry when a child is not eating well. Many parents feel that if their child misses a meal, it could be damaging to their health. However, it's important to put a child's fussy behavior around food into context. Instead of worrying about what is eaten over the course of a day, think about what they have eaten over a whole week⁵ It can also be useful to make notes of what and how much they eat throughout the day - often it's more than you think. For your own peace of mind, as long as your child is a healthy weight and has enough energy then they are likely to be getting enough food⁵

Passing or Persistent?

Fussy eating can take two main forms. These are 'transient' (passing) and 'persistent'⁶. We know that nearly half of children are fussy about what they eat at some point during their early years⁶. For most children, this fussiness seems to pass, indicating that is simply a phase in their normal development⁵.

However, if a fussy child continues to refuse food beyond preschool age, this may be a sign that the behavior is more persistent⁶. There can be many underlying reasons for this. For example, some children can be 'sensory sensitive' and have heightened responses to the taste, smell or physical feel/look of foods which can be one factor driving picky eating⁷. If you are having problems shifting fussy eating see our 'Coping with Fussy Foodies' fact sheet for advice and tips on how to deal with this.



Little Foodie Facts

- About half of children are fussy about their food at some point in early childhood.⁵
- For most children fussiness will pass - it is simply a phase of normal development.⁵
- A child who is fussy about food but is growing well is likely to be eating a sufficient balance of foods and getting enough energy and nutrients.⁷
- Boys are more prone to persistent fussy eating⁶ though science hasn't yet deciphered exactly why!



Conclusions

Fussy eating is really common amongst young children. It's also a very normal stage of development. However, when children don't eat what you have prepared it can be very frustrating.

Fussy eating does tend to be a short 'phase' for most children but others can have more persistent fussy habits (hats off to these parents).

To help identify if you have a fussy eater in the house we have prepared some questions for you to contemplate. We hope you find these useful. If you find yourself answering yes a lot you may wish to read our Coping with Fussy Foodies fact sheet.



There's a fussy eater in the house? Questions to ponder:

1. Are mealtimes not enjoyable?
2. Are portion sizes unrealistic?
3. Are they missing out on opportunities to watch others eat at mealtimes?
4. Are they hungry when it comes to mealtimes or are they filling up on other foods or milk in-between?
5. Are they offered a wide variety of foods or are only a select few offered?
6. Are they refusing meals to save room for dessert?
7. Are treats being glorified?
8. Do they refuse specific foods or does it change day to day?
9. Do you make another meal if your child does not eat the one given?
10. Is the child fussy in other environments such as at school or with friends?
11. Are they missing a mealtime routine or structure?
12. Is your child regularly having different foods to the rest of the family?



Please note

This fact sheet has been based on scientific evidence available at the time that it was written. The information contained in this commentary is not a substitute for medical advice or treatment. We recommend consultation with your doctor or health care professional if you have any concerns around your child's health.

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Further Information: www.littlefoodie.org

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