

ADHD & Autism: Eating problems fact sheet

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Lots of parents can relate to having to navigate difficult mealtimes with their child at some point, and picky eating is a natural phase in childhood, but for some children challenges with food will persist.

Children with ADHD or ASD may have ongoing challenges around food or mealtimes. Here we explore common reasons why this may be.

1. Physical / Organic reasons: Issues such as stomach pain, constipation, tooth decay etc. can all impact eating. Children with ADHD and ASD will experience the same physical conditions and childhood illnesses as other children, but due to sensory, cognitive and executive functioning challenges, may not be able to recognise or articulate their discomfort

2. Irregular / impulsive eating patterns: Challenges with executive functioning may mean that children with ADHD or ASD miss mealtimes and skip meals. Inattentive type ADHD characteristics are often associated with decreased awareness of hunger and fullness signals.

3. Food choices: Often the foods chosen by children who experience irregular or impulsive eating patterns are those lower in nutritional value, such as sweets and snacks and highly processed foods. This may have an impact on energy levels, fatigue, poor concentration and weight, as well as negatively impacting overall general health.

4. Sensory food aversion: Children with ASD often have challenges with sensory stimuli around foods. This may be about how a food looks, tastes, smells or feels. Some children seek out sensory input through foods, for example, eating crunchy foods like carrots or crackers, whilst others may prefer lower sensory inputs and may always opt for smooth foods like yoghurt. Sensory challenges can lead to mealtime anxieties and fearing food.

5. What to expect: Mealtimes can be confusing times with some children unsure of what will happen and what is expected of them, for example, where they sit, what food will be presented, how much they need to eat, when will they know mealtime is over.

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About ADHD Foundation

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