Cystic Fibrosis Trust

Food refusal in children with cystic fibrosis

Cystic Fibrosis Trust is grateful to the dietitians from the British Dietetic Association Cystic Fibrosis Specialist Group who prepared the information in this leaflet.

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Trusted Information Creator
Patient Information Forum

BDA The Association of UK Dietitians
Cystic Fibrosis
Specialist Group

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Contents

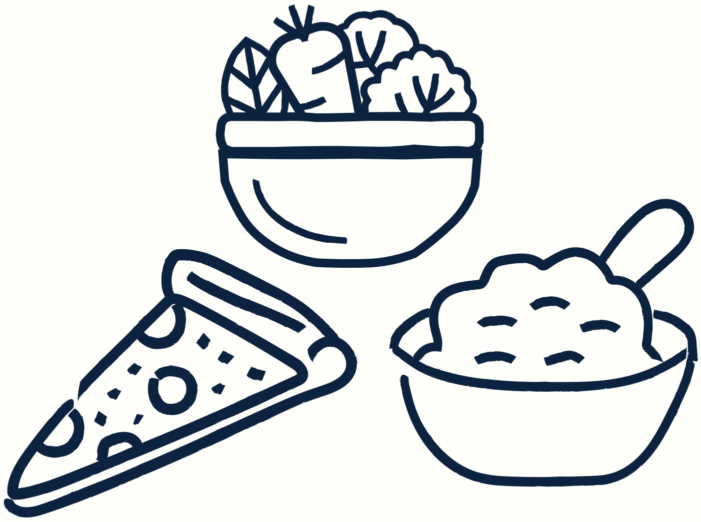
Introduction

Many children, both those with cystic fibrosis (CF) and those without, go through phases of refusing to eat or being selective about their food choices (fussy eaters).

This is a normal part of growing up and is a way of your child showing independence, but it can be frustrating and worrying for parents.

Your child may be slow to eat, take longer to chew food or be selective about the food they will eat. Children over one year of age often refuse or spit out foods. This is because children generally become more mobile at this time and so are able to find and pick up foods and food-like things from around them, and put them in their mouth. Refusing or spitting out food is a natural instinct, it’s purpose is to stop a child from eating something they shouldn’t. This period rarely lasts long.

This leaflet is aimed at younger children up to 10 years of age and contains suggestions to help you and your child get into a good routine with food and meals and avoid long-term battles at mealtimes. The following suggestions will work best if they are done every day/mealtime, but they can take time to make a difference. This is because eating behaviours have taken time to develop, so they will also take time to change.



Have regular mealtimes

Having regular mealtimes helps prepare your child for meals and snacks at certain times of the day (eg breakfast, mid-morning snack, lunch, after school/ mid-afternoon snack and evening meal). Your child will start to feel hungry at the usual meal and snack times. If your child refuses a meal, don't offer any other food until the next scheduled snack or meal.

Limit meals to 30 minutes. Most children eat all the food they are going to eat within the first 30 minutes of a mealtime and after that very little extra food will be eaten. Limiting the meal to 30 minutes will help both your stress and any anxiety your child is feeling. It also allows time for your child to feel hungry before the next meal.

Make mealtimes a positive time

The more enjoyable mealtimes are the more your child will eat. You do not want your child to feel that eating is a medical task or a chore. They will eat more if it is a pleasant part of every day.

Like adults, children find it difficult to eat when the atmosphere is tense, so make sure mealtimes are as relaxed as possible. A good example is a buffet at a party, where the variety of food available coupled with the relaxing atmosphere tends to encourage us to eat more than we normally would. Avoid coaxing, bribing, arguing or pleading with your child to eat, as this may make your child eat less because it is more stressful.

Other tips for positive mealtimes:

- Make sure there is nothing more interesting going on around you at mealtimes that may distract your child (eg turn off electronic tablets or television).
- Sit at a table together as a family and use brightly-coloured plates and cups that your child will enjoy.
- Family members are important in setting a good example of eating behaviour and can help make mealtimes social and more fun.
- Big portions can put off your child from eating, so only give your child an amount of food they are likely to be able to eat. You can always give more if they want more.
- Similarly, do not expect your child to always clear their plate. Remember that a small amount eaten can sometimes be a huge achievement for your child.
- Avoid fizzy drinks. They don't contain much goodness, and they tend to fill children up so less food is eaten.
- Remember that when offering your child a new food, they may need to try it many times before they like it. Many adults don't like coffee, olives or alcohol the first time they taste it! It is only after tasting it several times that we learn to like it.

Use your child's developing skills to make mealtimes fun

Children feel good about learning new skills, and you can use this to help make mealtimes fun.

- Young children may like to eat with a fork and spoon.
- When young children first learn to eat by themselves they may eat less. However, in the long-term this is better than the parents feeding them.
- Older children may enjoy helping to prepare the meal. They could choose a recipe from a children's cookbook, help prepare food, help cook some parts of the meal, or set the table.

Use encouragement and praise

- Praise your child immediately if they have eaten well, and be clear about what has pleased you.
- When praising, show enthusiasm by adding eye contact, a smile and/or a hug or high five.
- Avoid combining praise with put-downs, and try not to remind your child of past failures. You could say "**Try again next time**", instead of "**You won't get any stickers if you don't eat your meat**".
- Never try to force your child to eat. This may make your child more worried about mealtimes.
- When the meal is over, reward your child for the things they have done well. Don't punish your child for not eating, as this only makes mealtimes stressful for everyone.

Practical ideas to reward positive steps forward

Consider the following ways of rewarding positive steps forward, this can be used for a child of three or older.

- Each time your child does something positive they can put an item (eg dried pasta or plastic balls) into a small glass/plastic jar. Your child can see the amount increasing within the jar.
- Create a reward chart and use stickers or ticks to fill it in each time your child does something positive.

Plan a reward for when the jar or reward chart is full (choose something small, not too expensive and easy, as you may want to repeat a reward chart again sometime, choose time spent together doing something the child enjoys, small prizes, or a lucky-dip box).

Things to think about

To avoid unnecessary battles with your child about eating, keep in mind who is responsible for what. Parents are responsible for what is prepared and how it is presented. The child (not the parent) is responsible for whether they eat it and how much they eat.

Parents need to provide nutritious food, establish routine meal and snack times that are pleasant and social occasions, and set standards of behaviour for mealtimes.

Children are known to be cautious about trying new foods. Let them get used to seeing, touching and tasting just small amounts of new foods according to their own timing. Repeat the exposure to new foods in small amounts alongside favourite foods, and reward these taste adventures as needed.

As a parent of a child with CF, it is understandably difficult not to put pressure on your child when they refuse to eat or do not eat enough.

When they refuse to eat, immediately say **"That's all right, you don't have to eat but sit here and keep us company while we eat."** Avoid talking to your child when they are not eating, but when they start to eat give them attention (eg smile or talk to them).

A summary of strategies you can try

Avoid	Do
• entering into conflict • punishing • getting angry • coaxing • forcing • preparing something else • insisting • threatening • arguing • taking away a privilege	• limit the time available for eating a meal to 30 minutes • ignore your child's refusal and carry on with the meal • invite your child to stay and socialise at the meal table • give your child the choice to either eat the meal or have nothing until the next meal or snack time • ask your child to help prepare meals • give rewards for positive steps

If you are worried about your child contact your child's CF team for support.

The following websites provide information on healthy eating habits.

www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/fussy-eaters
www.childfeedingguide.co.uk
www.chef4cf.com

Further information

Find more information resources about living with cystic fibrosis at **cysticfibrosis.org.uk/information**.

Our Helpline is open 10am – 4pm Monday to Friday. It's available to anyone looking for information or support with any part of cystic fibrosis, a listening ear, or just to talk things through.

How to reach us:
- Call **0300 373 1000** or **020 3795 2184**
- Email **helpline@cysticfibrosis.org.uk**
- Chat with us on **Facebook**, **Twitter** or **Instagram**
- Message us on WhatsApp on **07361 582053**

Visit **cysticfibrosis.org.uk/helpline** for more information.

We welcome your feedback on our resources.

You can also ask for this resource in large print or as a text file. Email **infoteam@cysticfibrosis.org.uk**.

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This leaflet has been designed to be given out by a CF dietitian, along with their advice. If you downloaded or requested it directly from Cystic Fibrosis Trust we would advise you to discuss this information with your CF dietitian.

The information in this leaflet is based on clinical best practice and a consensus of opinion by dietitians within the British Dietetic Association Cystic Fibrosis Specialist Group. For detailed guidance on CF nutrition, please see the **Consensus document on nutritional management of cystic fibrosis**. Our consensus documents as well as other publications about cystic fibrosis can be found at **cysticfibrosis.org.uk/publications** or they can be ordered through our Helpline.

The information in this leaflet is general, please discuss it with your dietitian for a more personalised look at the topic.

Next review due: September 2027

Cystic Fibrosis Trust

Cystic Fibrosis Trust is the charity uniting people to stop cystic fibrosis. Our community will improve care, speak out, support each other and fund vital research as we race towards effective treatments for all.

We won’t stop until everyone can live without the limits of cystic fibrosis.

cysticfibrosis.org.uk

Uniting for a life *unlimited*