Re: Selective eating.

Selective eating is a common problem.

It is normal for children from 1 – 2 years of age to develop food “neophobia” or reluctance to trial new foods. This is probably an evolutionary survival mechanism. This peaks around 18-24 months and then improves in most children. Twenty five percent of parents describe their pre-schoolers as poor or “picky eaters”.

Some children will continue to have food neophobia, and become selective eaters. As well as reluctance to trial new foods, these children often eat only small portions, will only eat their favourite foods, avoid certain food types, colours or textures. They tend to prefer energy dense food types and avoid healthier food options such as vegetables.

There are a number of contributing factors to selective eating however this is in general a behavioural pattern and not related to underlying pathological causes.

Most children with selective eating continue to grow. If a child isn’t gaining weight, they should be referred us. Please ensure all of their heights and weights accompany the referral.

We recommend reviewing the child’s diet. If it is a long standing concern or severely restricted diet, we recommend checking coeliac serology and iron studies (including a ferritin). You may also want to consider checking Vitamin A or Vitamin E levels depending on the diet.

Selective eating is common in children with Autism Spectrum disorder, however not all children with selective eating have autism. Children where the main concern is Autism should be referred back to paediatrics, clearly stating the developmental concerns.

The treatment of selective eating is behavioural modification. As long as the child is gaining weight and growing in length, there is time to make behavioural modification. The earlier behaviour modification is implemented, the better. The longer the selective eating goes on for, the longer treatment generally takes. Our suggestions for treatment are based on the Canadian paediatric society guidelines which can be found at <https://www.cps.ca/en/documents/position/toddler-preschooler-who-does-not-eat>

Treatment suggestions include:

Start by offering smaller portions. Smaller portions are not as overwhelming and allows parents the opportunity to praise their child for getting through most of the serving. More can then be added after if your child is still hungry

Parents are responsible for which foods are offered. Children are responsible for how much they eat. Some children may not eat anything in some meals – this is ok! They usually make up for it at the next meal.

Parents should offer some familiar foods and one new food (in very small amounts). At each meal try to include one serving of protein (meat, chicken, fish, egg or legumes), one serving or carbohydrate (potato, rice, pasta) and plenty of vegetables and/or fruit.

Offering multiple vegetables per meal can increase the amount of vegetables that are eaten by children <https://www.upi.com/Health_News/2019/09/19/Offering-choices-may-lead-children-to-eat-more-vegetables/7351568920171/>

Try to avoid snacks as they may interfere with meals. Grazing throughout the day should be discouraged.

Also try to avoid filling up on lollies, biscuits, chips, milk, juice and soft drinks. They will reduce a child’s appetite for nutritious foods.

To stimulate appetite, exercise and play is important.

It is important to have an established mealtime routine. Encourage children to set the table. Prior to meals, children need 10-15 minutes of quiet time. Meals should be at the table as much as possible and distractions such as TV or devices should be switched off.

Meals times are an opportunity for family to spend quality time together. They should be fun. Avoid battles and using punishment. Focus on the positive. An upset child is unlikely to eat.

Meals are also an opportunity for parents to role model enjoying eating a range of food.

Useful Websites:

1. Healthy Food Guide: [www.healthyfood.co.nz](http://www.healthyfood.co.nz)
2. Fruit / Vegetables: [www.5aday.co.nz](http://www.5aday.co.nz)
3. Vegetables: [www.vegetables.co.nz](http://www.vegetables.co.nz)
4. Family meals: [www.feedingourfamilies.org.nz](http://www.feedingourfamilies.org.nz)
5. Breakfast: www.breakfast-eaters.org.nz

Ngā mihi

Yours sincerely

Electronically checked and approved

Paediatric Grading Team