

EATING ISSUES

Some children will have issues with food and eating. Some characteristics associated with neurodevelopmental conditions increase the likelihood that eating issues could arise. The links between eating and diet will be discussed in this section.

AUTISM

Some Autistic children struggle to eat a variety of food and can be very selective in the foods they will eat. An Autistic child may refuse certain foods, regardless of how hungry they are. A clinical diagnosis describes the eating pattern that some Autistic children and young people experience, with very restricted diets. This disorder is named Avoidant and Restricted Food Intake Disorder (ARFID). Please note that ARFID is far more than just 'fussy eating'. ARFID is different from other restrictive eating disorders as it is not affected by a person's self-image; beliefs about the size and shape of their body. They are not restricting their food intake to lose weight, and it does not feature some of the other behaviours common in other eating disorders, such as over-exercising.

There is currently no dedicated ARFID service in Southend, but support and advice from a dietician for ARFID is available.

The National Autistic Society has some good information and advice on eating issues. Please go to their website for more information; www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/eating/all-audiences

Sensory

Many Autistic children and young people experience sensory difficulties where they can be either over or under-sensitive to different sensory inputs, such as sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, texture, balance, and how they feel internally. They may not cope with the smell, taste, or texture of certain foods, which means they will be unwilling even to try to eat them, regardless of how much encouragement they are given or how hungry they are.

If they are over-sensitive to taste, they may only want to eat bland food, or if they are under-sensitive to taste, they may only want to eat intensely flavoured or spicy food.

If they are over-sensitive to texture, they may avoid anything crunchy or hard, or that has a crumbly coating. If they are under-sensitive, they may avoid food in sauce or soft food, favouring crunchy or hard food. They may find certain textures unbearable.

Sensory needs also play a part in the environment that they are sitting in to eat. It could be too noisy, overwhelming, or distracting, or the chair may be uncomfortable. This would prevent them from being able to eat.

Food presentation

Autistics are known to have strong attention to detail and have difficulty with change. This can mean that they will only eat a particular food from a certain supermarket, even if it is common in every supermarket. The difference in packaging, or the subtle difference in taste or texture, is enough to prevent an Autistic child or young person from eating it.

How the food is presented on the plate also plays a part, in that a lot of Autistic children and young people cannot eat food that is touching other food items (e.g. potatoes touching the peas). They may also resist eating if the food has been arranged on the plate differently than they are happy with and used to. They are also highly sensitive to changes in the extent that food is cooked – undercooked or overcooked can mean the difference between them eating it or not.

Anxiety

If they have had a distressing experience with food (choking, vomiting, infant acid reflux or other stomach conditions, etc.), this may cause the person to develop feelings of fear and anxiety around food and avoid food.

Social aspect

Autistic children and young people may find it stressful to eat around other people or formally around a dinner table and may, therefore, lose their appetite due to anxiety or be unable to eat. They may prefer to eat alone or in front of the TV or tablet that may have the bonus of distracting them from the worry of eating.

Routines

Autistic children and young people often rely on routine to feel safe and know what is happening around them. If you change the time, location, or people they are eating around, they may have difficulty eating because they struggle with the change in routine.

Pica is an eating disorder that also occurs with more frequency in autistic children. Pica refers to eating or putting non-edible items in their mouth, such as dirt, metal, faeces, sand, toys, etc. Some of the causes associated with Pica could be medical, dietary, sensory, or behavioural and may include;

- ▶ Not understanding what items are edible and which are not
- ▶ That they are sensory seekers ([see the sensory section for more details](#)) and enjoy the feeling of having the item in their mouth or by swallowing it
- ▶ It may help to relieve their anxiety, stress, pain or discomfort
- ▶ If it is metal, it may be that they have an iron deficiency
- ▶ It could be a continuing infant mouthing behaviour or a late occurring mouthing phase
- ▶ They may be attention-seeking
- ▶ They may be avoiding a demand

Suppose a child is eating non-food items. In that case, it is essential to discuss this concern with your GP, who can begin medical investigations and refer you for support to address the causes of this eating disorder. Eating can also be affected by a delay in physical development or low muscle tone.

AUTISM AND ANOREXIA

Autism is an eating disorder where an individual severely restricts their diet to lose weight. Their motivation for eating a diet limited in calories is to become “thin”, and they do not recognise when they are within a healthy weight range. They will continue to view themselves as “too fat,” even when they are healthy or have become underweight. Many autistics have a limited diet due to sensory processing difficulties or other factors associated with autism, rather than difficulties with body image.

The link between autism and anorexia is complicated. Sometimes, when people develop anorexia, they may be autistic, and their autism has not been recognised. Having anorexia tends to lead to many behaviours and difficulties associated with autism, which can lead to confusion about whether or not the person is autistic. Suppose your child or young person has developed a restricted diet, and expressed some worries about their body image. In that case, it is very important to contact your GP, who can refer your child to be assessed for any eating disorder.

ADHD

Children and young people with ADHD may be slightly more at risk for developing an eating disorder. Impulsivity and inattention associated with ADHD could be contributing factors as children and young people with ADHD may not be as aware of or focused on their eating habits. They may not recognise when they are hungry during the day, for example, and then end up overeating later on. They may also not pay attention to when they are full and keep on eating.

When children have weight problems or difficulty with self-control around food, it is important to speak to someone who can help understand what could be contributing to a child’s difficulties with self-control around food so that appropriate support can be offered. It is more common for an ADHD child or young person to be underweight than overweight.

Who can Help?

The first step would be to visit your GP, ask them for advice, and they may refer you to one or more of the following professionals;

Dentist – selective eating (crisps, sweets, etc.) may result in poor dental hygiene or toothache, which could restrict your child or young person from eating foods that may aggravate the pain.

Dietitian – They can do an assessment and provide treatment for dietary-related problems such as constipation, allergies and intolerances, and give advice on eating issues, weight gain and weight loss.

Clinical Psychologist or Psychiatrist – They can provide therapy if the GP suspects that the eating problem is psychological.

Paediatrician – A doctor who is an expert in child health issues who can help provide solutions to dietary issues and investigate possible underlying problems.

Speech and Language Therapist (SALT) can advise on feeding issues and swallowing problems (dysphagia).

EWMHS – They can help with any mental health issues that may be causing eating difficulties.

There is also a Helpline service for young people and adults with eating disorders called BEAT – Beating Eating Disorders.

Their website is www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/ and their Helpline numbers are;

0345 634 7650
(Youthline)

0345 634 1414
(Adults helpline)

How you can Help

Sometimes, finding the cause of an eating issue is half the battle.

It would be helpful to keep a food diary with details such as;

- ▶ What time of day did they eat?
- ▶ What did they eat?
- ▶ Where did they eat?
- ▶ How much did they eat?
- ▶ Who was there?
- ▶ How did those present respond to the person eating the particular food?
- ▶ What was going on around them? (Environmental factors)

This could help you to reveal some causes of the eating difficulties.

Using Social Stories around mealtimes or eating could help.

Having a visual timetable of meals and what is being prepared so that they know ahead of time. Ensure that you stick to both the time and meal that is displayed on these though, or it may cause additional anxiety.

