



Picky Eater or Feeding/Swallowing Disorder?

Many moms and dads report that their child is a picky eater. It can be difficult to recognize if this is simply individual preference or a significant problem.

How many times have you heard comments like these?

- She will only eat this one thing. (e.g. chicken nuggets, goldfish crackers)
- My son gets upset at mealtime.
- Dinner lasts for more than an hour.
- He gags when given new foods.
- My toddler stills eats baby food.

Do your patients present with these symptoms?

- Limited weight gain or growth
- Dehydration and Failure to Thrive
- Repeated respiratory infections or pneumonia
- Parent concerns about nutrition

Of course, adequate intake is an important component to health. Difficulties can create not only dietary problems, but also impact family dynamics and routines, social opportunities and wellness.

When a medical diagnosis does not account for the difficulties, it may be a feeding or swallowing problem.

- A feeding disorder includes problems with accepting and eating a healthy variety of foods.
- A swallowing disorder includes problems with safely sucking, chewing and swallowing.

Feeding problems are characterized by:

- A restricted range or variety of foods, usually less than 20 items
- Resistance to adding new foods
- Refusal of entire categories of food textures, temperatures or appearance

- Crying when presented with new foods
- Long feeding/ meal times (more than 30 minutes)
- Frequent gagging or vomiting
- Taking a few bites and then refusing more food

Swallowing problems are characterized by:

- Difficulty breast feeding, drinking or chewing
- Coughing or gagging during meals
- Excessive drooling
- Loss of food/liquid out of the mouth or nose
- Difficulty chewing food in preparation for swallowing
- Residual food in mouth after swallowing
- Noisy breathing after swallowing

Many of our speech therapists and occupational therapists have specialty training in both the sensory and motor aspects of a feeding or swallowing problem. An evaluation would include an examination of the structures and movements in the mouth, observation of feeding behaviors, observations of the influences of respiration and posture, and informal assessment of nutrition. Food and drink trials are often included in an assessment.

Treatment for feeding disorders can help a child become a functional eater. Treatment strategies include work on oral sensory awareness, motor execution and motor planning tasks, social modeling, structured meal and snack times, positive reinforcement and home programming. Also, specialty treatments are available including:

- Neuro-Developmental Treatment (NDT)TM
- Sequential Oral Sensory (SOS) Approach
- Vital StimTM