HELP
My child won’t eat!

A Guide for families
Help, my child won’t eat!

Many children go through phases of refusing to eat certain foods or at times refusing to eat anything at all.

This is particularly common in children up to the age of five years, but may occur at any time. It is often a way of showing independence (‘the terrible twos’) and is a normal part of growing up.

Although it is very worrying, children will not harm themselves if they don’t eat enough for a short while. They may need less to eat than you think.

**It may help to discuss the problem with other parents who have already gone through the same situation with their child.**

If the problem shows no sign of improving, or if you are worried about your child’s weight and growth, you can contact your Health Visitor, GP, or Dietitian for further advice.
What can I do?

Offer regular meals and snacks, as this is better than letting your child ‘pick’ through the whole day. Young children often need 3 meals and 2-3 nutritious snacks.

Always offer 2 courses at a meal, one savoury and one sweet.

Eat at the same time as your child if possible, as he will learn from you. Try and make meals enjoyable social occasions.

Sit together at the table. Use brightly coloured plates and cups. Present food in fun and attractive ways.

Try and eat in a calm, relaxed area, without the television or toys! Children are easily distracted.

Try not to rush a meal, as your child may be slow to eat, yet try not to let meals drag on for too long - half an hour is about right.
How can I help?

NEVER FORCE A CHILD TO EAT

Your child is telling you he has had enough when:

- He turns his head away
- He pushes the bowl or plate away or onto the floor!
- He screams or shouts
- He spits food out repeatedly
- He holds his food in his mouth and refuses to swallow it

Although it is a very difficult thing to do, try not to show that you are worried or annoyed by your child not eating. If he does eat, show him you are pleased (smile and say ‘Good Boy, well done’ etc). If he stops eating at a meal, try once to encourage him to eat a little more. If he doesn’t want anymore then take the food away without comment.

It is a good idea for children to use their fingers to play with food. Do not worry if they make a mess!

When your child eats well offer a reward such as taking him to the park or spending some special time playing together.

Do not offer a reward of food.
Which foods do I give when?

- Give small portions of food at meal times. If these are finished, praise your child and offer more. Do not take food away and offer a completely different meal if the first one is refused.

- Finger foods are often easier to manage as a child can feed himself. Try sandwiches, sausages, cheese slices, cream cheese on crackers, chips, fish fingers, vegetable slices and pieces of fruit.

- Try offering new foods with known favourites. It is a good idea to offer at least one thing you know your child will eat at each meal.

- Fizzy drinks, squash and milk can fill a child up, as can crisps, biscuits and cakes, so they have a smaller appetite for food at meal times. Avoid giving snacks too close to meal times.

Milk is a nutritious drink but should not replace meals. Be careful not to let your child drink lots of milk in the day or at night.
Sensible eating for 1-5 year olds

Suggestions to help you:

BREAKFAST
Small bowl of breakfast cereal and milk or toast with butter/margarine and jam/honey. Cup of milk to drink.

LIGHT MEAL
Sandwich in bitesize shapes e.g. ham and tomato, cheese and cucumber, peanut butter or baked beans or cheese on toast. Small pot of yogurt/fromage frais/fruit. Cup of water or diluted fruit juice.

MAIN MEAL
Pasta dishes e.g. macaroni cheese, spaghetti bolognese.
Chapatti/rice and curry.
Fish in white, cheese or parsley sauce.
Roast meat or mince e.g. shepherds pie.
Fish fingers/chicken nuggets.
Serve with vegetables e.g. broccoli, fingers of carrot and swede, peas and a scoop of mashed potato.
Fruit segments/slices/shapes.
Cup of water or diluted fruit juice.

Also offer 2-3 small nutritious snacks each day.
See back page for ideas.
Milk and Dairy Foods: Aim for 3 servings a day. These can be given as full fat milk, cheese, yogurts, fromage frais, custard and milk puddings.

Meat, Fish, Eggs, Dhals, Pulses, and Nuts: Offer 2 servings a day. All types of meat and fish are suitable. Many children enjoy minced meat, sausages, chicken, fish fingers, and fish in sauces (try to include an oily fish such as salmon, mackerel or sardines - once or twice a week). Chick peas, kidney beans and lentils make good casseroles. Hummus, dhal, eggs and baked beans are good too!

Starchy Foods: Give these foods at each meal. Most children enjoy eating breakfast cereals and porridge. Other starchy foods to encourage include bread, potatoes, chapatti, yam and green bananas, pasta, tinned spaghetti, rice and couscous.

Fruit and Vegetables: Offer 5 small portions of fruit and vegetables each day. Try raw and cooked vegetables, fresh, dried, tinned and cooked fruits or pure fruit juice.

Fats and Oils: Growing children need some butter/margarine and oils. Adding oils, butter and cream is a good way to increase calorie intake.

Sugar and Salty Foods: Foods containing sugar are useful for adding extra calories. Offer them as a pudding and try not to give them between meals. Look after your child’s teeth. Try and avoid giving too many salty snacks and salty processed foods.

Vitamins: A vitamin supplement, containing vitamins A, C and D, is recommended for all children from six months up to five years. This is particularly important for babies and young children who are picky eaters and those of Asian, African or Middle-Eastern origin. Ask your health visitor about this.