

Ask a Nurse with Isabel Clark

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Picky eaters

A guide to understanding your toddler's tummy

Q. My two-year-old son used to eat everything I offered him, but all of a sudden he seems to be picky about almost all the food I give him. Mealtime is becoming a real struggle and I'm worried he's missing out on some important nutrients his body needs. What can I do?

A. Picky eating is normal and common during the toddler years, but it can make you worry. Children eat for different reasons than adults and don't always like new things. They eat a food when it tastes good, not because it is good for them. Unfortunately for parents, toddlers have changing appetites and may decide that what tasted good one day tastes awful the next day. That makes it hard to plan meals for your family and you may find your menus starting to shrink as you try to adjust to what your son will eat. Before you begin changing your family meal plans, it is important to understand that parents and children have different jobs when it comes to feeding. The parent's job is to decide what, when and where to offer food. It is the child's job to decide whether to eat and how much to eat. To prevent feeding problems later on, both of you will need to do your jobs.

Q. What can I feed him to make sure he at least eats something?

A. Parents do the grocery shopping and decide what food to bring home and prepare. If you have good nutritious food in your home, it is much easier to stick to a healthy diet. Choose a variety of healthy food

choices as outlined in Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating. Think about what your family likes to eat, but do not limit the menu to foods your family easily accepts. When you introduce new foods make sure to offer a small amount first. Try to have one food at the table that your child likes and keep introducing new foods, one food at a time. Offer the new food at the beginning of the meal when your child is hungry and more likely to try it. Encourage your son to try one bite of the food when he says he doesn't like something. He can decide by tasting it if he wants to eat it or not. Respect his decision and don't force him to eat the food. It may take as many as 10 to 15 times before a new food is accepted, so even having it on your son's plate will help him become familiar with it. Try offering the rejected food in a different form at another time.

Q. How do I know if my son is getting enough to eat?

A. Your child's steady growth and active life is the best way to tell that he is eating enough to be healthy. Children's appetites change, so the amount your son eats may vary from day to day. Children know when they are hungry and when they are full, so avoid pressuring your son to finish all the food on his plate. He will know how much to eat. His portion sizes will tend to be smaller than yours as well, although he will probably eat more during a growth spurt. Unless there is an underlying medical problem, children will not starve themselves on purpose.

Q. Should my child have snacks?

A. Children have small stomachs and need to eat small amounts more often during the day. They need the routine of regular meals and snacks to grow well (usually three meals and two to three snacks a day). Plan snacks for at least two hours after a meal and two hours before the next meal. Make sure snacks are small so they won't interfere with mealtime appetite. If you plan meals and snacks at regular times, your son will be hungry when it is time to eat. Knowing that there are meals and snacks at regular times helps your child feel safe about eating and helps him not to think about food all the time.

Q. How can I make mealtime more relaxed?

A. Remember to be positive – it does not work to force your son to eat. It is easier to eat well when there is good food and good feelings. Eat at the table together and turn off the TV and radio during meals and snacks. Involve your child in making meals. Even small children can help out and may take more interest in eating something they have helped to make. Serve food in a form your child can handle. Remember that it is okay for children to eat with their hands! Present foods matter-of-factly in a calm, comfortable way, making sure you eat and enjoy the same foods yourself. Your child is watching you all the time so be a good role model. How you approach new foods will have a huge effect on your child so don't expect him to eat something you won't. Think carefully about the messages you are sending to your child and let him figure things out on his own. He may decide he likes a certain food if he has eaten it when he was hungry in a positive, relaxed environment.

Isabel Clark is a telehealth nurse with Calgary Health Link.

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The Calgary Health Region offers a free, two-hour class called Picky Eating. It gives parents of toddler and preschool children tips on coping with picky eating, refusal of foods, getting your child to eat vegetables, and more. For more information on these classes, visit: www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/nutrition or call Nutrition & Active Living at 943-8121. Outside the city of Calgary, please call your nearest public health centre.

If you would like to speak to a health professional, you can contact your family physician or speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling Calgary Health Link.

Calgary: 403-943-LINK (5465)

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