

AN OVERVIEW

Picky Eating: Sensory Aversions & Ritualistic Eating Behaviors

The term “picky eater” typically refers to someone—regardless of age—who has strong food preferences based on what they find appealing. While their food choices might be seen as unusual by others, they are generally able to manage most eating situations without significant difficulty. Their preferences do not usually interfere with their ability to maintain a healthy weight or impact their overall lifestyle and well-being.

What happens when a person refuses to eat not because of preference, but because of a sensory issue?

This brings us into the area of sensory aversions and ritualistic eating. These behaviors are especially common in individuals with autism, often due to a heightened sensitivity to sensory input. It's often linked to sensory processing disorder or may be influenced by genetic factors that affect how the gut, brain, and sensory systems work together.

Because of the ritualistic eating behaviors linked to sensory processing disorder (SPD), parents often feel stressed by how limited their child's diet becomes. Many children avoid trying new foods, especially due to strong sensitivities to certain textures.



What are Sensory Aversions?

Sensory aversion happens when a person has trouble handling how a food feels, tastes, smells, looks, or sounds. Because of this, it can be hard for them to eat certain foods, often leading to very selective eating habits.



What are Ritualistic Eating Behaviors?

In autism, ritualistic eating behaviors are repeated actions or routines around food that help a person feel more in control or less anxious. While these routines can be calming for the individual, they may disrupt daily life and cause stress for others. In feeding disorders, these behaviors are often linked to food refusal, picky eating, hyperactivity, and challenging behaviors during meals.



What Can I Do to Help?

If you're a provider, teacher, or caregiver supporting someone with autism who has trouble with food due to sensory issues or routines, it's important to know how to spot these behaviors—and when to seek help from a specialist.

AN OVERVIEW

Picky Eating: Sensory Aversions & Ritualistic Eating Behaviors



Strategies

Check for medical issues first.

Common health problems that can cause food refusal include acid reflux, constipation, diarrhea, and eosinophilic esophagitis (a condition that affects the esophagus).

Provide stable and supportive seating.

A secure seating position helps individuals focus on eating by reducing distractions from poor balance or posture. It also supports better hand-to-mouth coordination and chewing, while lowering the risk of choking and promoting proper swallowing and digestion.

Stay calm and start small.

Be patient as your child tries new foods. You can help create a positive experience by offering tiny amounts of new foods next to their favorite, familiar ones.

Take small steps toward tasting.

Many individuals with autism may feel anxious about trying new foods. Support your child by encouraging them to explore the food gradually—first by looking at it, then touching it, and finally smelling it. This helps build comfort and familiarity before tasting.

Pay attention to textures.

Many individuals on the autism spectrum are sensitive to how foods feel in their mouths. During mealtimes, it's often the texture—not the taste—that causes discomfort or refusal. Understanding this can help you better support their eating needs.

Offer choices and a sense of control.

Giving your child some control can make mealtimes feel less overwhelming. For example, when planning dinner, let them choose one ingredient to include—this helps them feel involved and more willing to try new things.

Use rewards wisely.

It's important to encourage and positively reinforce your child's willingness to try new foods and be flexible. However, avoid using obvious bribes, as they can backfire and reduce motivation over time. Focus on gentle encouragement and praise instead.

RESOURCES & TOOLS

Picky Eating: Sensory Aversions & Ritualistic Eating Behaviors

When to Refer for Professional Support:

You should consider referring a child to a specialist (such as a pediatrician, occupational therapist, speech-language pathologist, dietitian, or feeding therapist) if:

- Weight loss or poor growth is present, or if the child is not meeting nutritional needs.
- The child eats fewer than 20 foods and consistently refuses to try new ones.
- Mealtimes are extremely stressful or disruptive to family routines.
- The child gags, coughs, or chokes regularly during meals.
- There are signs of medical issues like frequent vomiting, reflux, constipation, or signs of pain when eating.
- The child has strong sensory aversions (e.g., refuses foods based on texture, smell, or temperature).
- There are ritualistic behaviors that significantly interfere with eating (e.g., food must be a certain color or cut a specific way).
- The child refuses entire food groups, especially proteins or fruits/vegetables.
- The child shows signs of oral-motor difficulties, such as trouble chewing or swallowing.



Finding a Specialist

Therapy can support autistic individuals in building stronger relationships, encouraging positive behavior changes, resolving conflicts, managing stress, and developing effective coping strategies. It also provides valuable emotional support. Through a variety of approaches, therapy can enhance communication and motor skills, promoting greater independence and a sense of empowerment.

ASCV.ORG

This fact sheet was developed with support from Speech-Language Pathologist at VCU Children's Hospital. The information provided is for educational and informational purposes only and is not intended to replace professional medical, diagnostic, or therapeutic advice. Always consult with a qualified healthcare provider or specialist regarding any questions or concerns about a medical condition or treatment.