

Patient Information Leaflet

Help, my child isn’t eating

- Mealtimes are a time for learning about food and eating should be an enjoyable experience. Eating together as a family encourages the child to copy eating and drinking behaviour. It is also a social time for families, so eating together should be encouraged.
- Make sure your child is sitting in an appropriate chair and is sitting with the rest of the family.
- Use brightly coloured bowls and plates. These may make the meal look more appealing.
- A calm, relaxed environment for eating and drinking may be helpful for some children, especially if they are easily distracted, however, some children benefit from some background noise. Try both approaches to find out which works best for your child.
- Never leave your child unsupervised whilst he or she is eating or drinking.
- Give your child lots of positive praise when he or she does eat and ignore any food refusal. Calmly offer the food three times before telling your child the meal is over, then remove the meal without any further comment. Limit mealtimes to no longer than 30 minutes.
- Try not to show your concern or make negative comments in front of your child.
- It is a good idea for children to use their fingers to play with their food. Do not worry if they make a mess. If your child stops eating at a meal, try to encourage him or her to take a little more. If this is successful, show that you are pleased and give positive verbal reinforcement. Never use food as a reward.
- Try not to rush a meal, as your child may be slow to eat, but try not to let the meal drag on for too long – half an hour is about right. Your dietitian will advise you on how to increase the energy density of your child’s meal so the mealtime can be reduced, if necessary.
- NEVER force feed your child.
- Avoid fluids just before and during meals, as this will reduce your child’s appetite. Often children are not hungry because they have had too much juice during the day and night. Try to avoid giving more than 1 ½ pints of fluid during the day. Children over the age of one year should not be given drinks during the night.
- Offer regular meals and snacks at set times, as this is better than letting your child ‘pick’ through the whole day.