

Help! My child only wants to eat chicken nuggets — what should I do?

Dinnertime is here, and your child refuses to eat anything but that one food they have been stuck on for what feels like months. Sound familiar? You may be feeling frustrated, annoyed, or even worried. Rest assured; this is normal behavior. The tips below can help you and your child work through this temporary situation.

What is going on?

Children may go through phases where they only want to eat one food or a few foods. These picky phases are called *food jags*. Food jags are a normal part of child development. Young children have a growing desire to feel independent. Children practice control over their day by choosing what to eat, how much to eat, or whether to eat at all.

Should I be worried?

When kids only want one or a few foods, parents and other caregivers might worry about the lack of variety. Food jags typically do not last long; therefore, it is unlikely to affect a child's development. However, if you have tried the tips below or feel like things aren't improving, call your local registered dietitian or your child's pediatrician. They are available to help you and your child navigate challenging times.

Tips for working through food jags

- **Continue to provide healthy food and drink.** Children may need to taste a food up to 15 times before they eat it. Serving new or previously rejected foods on the plate with their favorite food can make them more willing to try a new or different food.
- **Create colorful plates.** The more colors of fruit and vegetables on the plate, the more likely your child is to try or eat larger amounts of these nutritious foods.
- **Keep or create mealtime routines.** It is normal for children to eat a lot one day and less the next. It is also normal for them to eat a lot at one meal and pick at the next meal. Having consistent meal and snack times each day, while avoiding random snacking in between, can encourage your child to come hungry and more willing to eat the healthy foods served.
- **Give children a choice.** Once you have decided when and where meals occur and what types of food and drink are being served, the child gets to choose whether to eat and how much to eat.
- **Set an example.** Children pay attention to what you eat. They are also likely to mimic your behavior. If the parents and family members eat a well-balanced meal then the child will be more likely to eat this way, too.
- **Make mealtime fun.** Bribing or pressuring children to eat something can have negative longer-term consequences. Instead of focusing on what a child is not eating or trying to get a child to eat, get a conversation going about the best or funniest part of your day. Skip the stress and trust that your child will eat when they are hungry.

- **Give it time.** If a child has been on a food jag with no end in sight, try not to get discouraged that they are not reaching for new foods. Continuing to offer nutritious foods that you and the rest of the family enjoy is key as the child moves at their own pace in trying new foods.

Allowing your child to choose what, how much, or even whether or not they eat will encourage healthy eating patterns and behavior for the rest of your child's life. Following the simple guidelines listed above will likely lead to more adventurous eating soon.

References:

- Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. (2014). Feeding "Picky Eater" Preschoolers. Kids Eat Right. <https://eatrightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FeedingPickyPreschoolers.pdf>
- United States Department of Agriculture. (2012). Picky Eaters. WIC Works Resource System. <https://wicworks.fns.usda.gov/resources/picky-eaters>

Sources:

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