



Feeding disorders in infants and children

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“My child just sits in front of the dining table for hours without picking up the spoon or food.”

“My child rather suffers than eating. It is so difficult to put even one piece of rice into his mouth.”

“My child just swallows everything that goes into the mouth. She does not even want to chew or bite the food.”

“My child throws tantrum to avoid food.”

These are some of the signs and symptoms of feeding disorders. Many did not realize that this is a critical issue. According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), approximately 25% of children experience feeding disorders.

What is feeding disorders?

We usually refer the term ‘feeding disorders’ as a condition in which an infant or child is unable or refuses to eat, or has difficulty in eating. This unpleasant feeding experience can result in frequent sickness, failure to thrive, and even loss of life.

Some common types of feeding disorders in infants or children:

1. Premature infants

Infants born prior to 32 weeks of gestational age often have poorer sucking skills. They are easily tired and may also have breathing difficulties due to immaturity of their lungs.

Besides that, their little mouth structure and throat muscles are weaker and this might cause them to have a lower stamina for feeding.

They may also show poor sleep-wake states, and they may have more difficulties showing hunger to their caregivers.

2. Behavioral feeding issues

Children with behavioral feeding issues might show tantrum during meal times. They might also have some sensory issues at the areas of the hard palate or soft palate. They are usually picky with food i.e., some children love crunchy food; some only like to take lumpy food.

Some of them might not know how to chew on food that go into their mouth.

3. Infant reflux

Infants who have increased muscle tone in the abdominal area, prematurity and those with low tone of internal organs have higher risks with reflux issues. Reflux causes uneasy feelings during feeding and it might cause the infants to develop feeding difficulties at a later stage.

4. Oral motor structures

Infants who are born with cleft lip and/or palate may present with difficulties in producing a good suction for feeding, and nasal reflux. Consequently weight gain might be slow.

Correct positioning and suitable feeding bottles/teats will help to ensure thin liquid is pushed into the pharynx and away from the nasal cavity.

Signs and symptoms of feeding disorders:

1. Refuse to eat or drink at all
2. Taking too long time to finish one meal
3. Only taking certain texture, colour or type of food
4. Behavioral problems such as kicking, hitting, crying almost each meal time
5. Choke, gag or vomit during meal time
6. Poor weight gain
7. Do not like chewing on solid food by 18 months
8. Always drools during meal time

Feeding tips

1. Establish feeding routine regardless of the feeding issues.
2. Keep the feeding time short.
3. Make sure we always end the feeding session with happy ending.
4. Taking regular breaks to burp may be necessary as your baby will likely swallow a lot of air while learning to feed.
5. Stroking the baby under the chin while feeding will sometimes help the feeding progress.
6. Make sure child have good positioning during feeding.
7. Offer new food without pressure, sometimes letting them to prepare the food together might help them to feel 'safe'.
8. Be a positive model to your child during meal time
9. Keep trying; sometimes children need more than 10 times exposures to accept new food.

Information from this article was compiled from:

1. www.hmc.psu.edu/childrens/healthinfo/f/feeding.htm
2. www.nscchealth.nsw.gov.au
3. www.nationwidechildrens.org
4. www.johnshopkinsinternational.com
5. www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/feedingproblems2.shtml
6. www.homemade-baby-food-recipes.com/baby-feeding-problems.html