

ABUHB ARFID

(Avoidant and Restrictive Food Intake Disorder) Service

Helpful Tips

Information for families

If you are given this information by a professional it does not necessarily mean that your child has a diagnosis of ARFID. All children will benefit from these strategies.

Managing the Environment

- Understand that your child's eating pattern is not your fault but is because of their selective eating. Try not to blame yourself.
- Allow your child's **preferred foods**; this maintains weight, growth, health and nutrition. Offer 2 fixed choices to avoid overwhelming feelings.
- Explain to other **family members** your child's selective eating and what they can do to support you and your child. This may include what not to do!
- Explain to your child's **school**. Ask them to support strategies you are using at home and to communicate with you about what your child is eating (and how) in school. Our service offers information sessions for schools which they can access by contacting us using the details below.
- Where possible, promote **regular mealtimes** for breakfast, morning snack, lunch, afternoon snack, evening meal and evening snack. This will help your child learn when to feel hungry.
- Where possible, **sit at the table** as a family for mealtimes. These moments should be fun and relaxed with as little pressure or big emotions as possible.



Eating Stages

Infants

- Make sure your baby feels like a part of mealtimes as soon as they can sit in a chair
- Have your baby in the kitchen with you when cooking food, where possible and safe
- Offer as many different foods and textures as possible. Offer them multiple times, even if your baby makes a 'yuck!' face
- Give your baby soft pieces of food to hold at mealtimes from around 6 months
- Allow your baby to get messy and paint the high chair with their food!
- Prompt them to touch and interact with foods they are wary of
- Offer foods that are more likely to be accepted first and then work your way up; sweet, then salty, then sour
- Explore and offer both lumpy and pureed textures; avoid just offering stage 2 jars



Younger Children

- Always allow your child's preferred foods, and in times of stress offer only these
- Add a vitamin or mineral supplement to your child's diet, if needed and where possible
- Use relaxation and distraction to reduce your child's anxiety, particularly around mealtimes
- Keep as much variety and spontaneity in family life as possible. This will reduce the development and impact of rituals and routines
- Use any new context, setting or routine as an opportunity to add a new food to your child's diet



Older Children

- Always allow your child their preferred foods, particularly during stressful and anxious times.
- Help your child in learning to manage their anxiety; this might include seeking professional help.
- Schedule regular and achievable times for trying new foods
- When trying new foods, only work on one or two at a time. Most children need to be presented the same food at least 13 times before they will be willing to accept a new food.
- Keep a record of progress, including what new foods have been tried and/or added to the diet
- Provide the young person with opportunities to enjoy food in real-world eating situations – for example, going out with friends to a café or restaurant



Common Traps Adults Can Fall Into

Sometimes we might think about using strategies that seem helpful because we really want the best for children, and want to take away the distress they experience around food. As a parent or carer, you may be worried about your child's weight and height, and you might try to do whatever possible to prompt them to eat. However, there are some strategies that can risk making things harder for both you and your child. If you are concerned about your child's growth, you can check their weight against their height, but it's important to seek advice from a health professional like your GP.

You can also seek professional support if you are feeling anxious as a parent/carer, to help stop negative anxiety cycles at mealtimes

1. **Pressurising children to eat.** If your child feels anxious around food, it can be helpful to remember that anxiety means fear. If someone had a fear of spiders, it's unlikely that pressure from others would mean they could touch it, particularly if there is stress involved.
2. **Hiding or disguising foods or medicine in other foods.** Trust around a feared thing such as food is very important. If a food a child deems to be 'unsafe' touches one of their safe foods, there is a risk they won't eat the safe food again. This is sometimes referred to as 'contamination'.
3. **Withholding preferred foods** in favour of healthy foods. It's likely that your child's anxiety will be too strong and they will just not eat.
4. Using **rewards or bribes.** This is unlikely to help children to relax and may cause more anxiety.
5. **Expecting the child to imitate others** eating. Children with a fear of food are less likely to do this.

What else might be going on and seeking additional support

Seek professional help from your GP if you are concerned about an eating disorder, particularly if there has been unexplained weight loss

Seek professional help if you are concerned about any mental health issue such as more general anxiety or low mood

Manage the health risks in pica (eating non-food items), particularly if the pica items are potentially dangerous. Seek support from your GP or other health professional and provide safe alternatives to chew or eat

If a young person feels distressed at mealtimes, simple calming and grounding skills can help them to manage anxiety around food.

Here are some apps with helpful free content –



It can also be helpful for some young people to use strategies to help them shift their attention outside of their body – you could try this exercise together!

4

4 things
you can
see



3

3 things
you can
touch



2

2 things
you can
hear



1

1 good thing
about
yourself



Contact: ABB.PaediatricPsychology@wales.nhs.uk