

ASD Family Help

Your local Autism Support Charity



Diet & Weight



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Useful links and information

<http://www.easyhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/Healthy%20Eating.pdf>

 Healthy Eating	 Healthy Eating
 Eating healthy foods keeps your body in good working order.	 Eat food that is low in fat.
 5 Eat 5 portions of Fruit and vegetables every day.	 Eat food that is low in sugar.
 Drink plenty of water every day.	 Eat food that is low in salt.
	 Eat food that is high in fibre

<http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/understanding-behaviour/dietary-management-for-children-and-adolescents/dietary-management-over-eating.aspx>

Dietary management for children and adolescents with ASDs: over-eating

Some individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) can have problems relating to feeding and difficulties surrounding their diet. These dietary problems can relate to both over- and under-eating. Unfortunately, there is limited literature which focuses on this issue. Please note that all of the following points are general and therefore we

would always advise individuals or their carers to consult with a GP or a medical professional if they have any dietary issues.

The first step if you are concerned about an individual's diet should be to create a food diary. A food diary will hopefully be able to show possible reasons for the over-eating or weight gain. By regularly recording an individual's eating habits you will be provided with useful information about their eating pattern. Possible sample questions for the food diary could be:

What time of the day did they eat?

What did they eat?

Where did they eat?

How much did they eat?

Who was there?

Were there any environmental factors?

Possible reasons for over-eating and weight gain

Initially, it is important to identify, if possible, from the food diary whether it is the volume or type of food being eaten which is the core dietary issue. In addition, the following reasons may be affecting the individual's eating pattern.

Physical

Sometimes an individual may over-eat as a result of lack of control and the ability to know when they are full. It has been suggested that the hypothalamus, the part of the brain that tells us when we are full and regulates food intake, does not function correctly for individuals on the spectrum.

Obsession

One feature of ASDs can be obsessive behaviours; this is where an activity or interest is extreme in one or all of the following factors: its intensity, frequency and/or duration. For some individuals on the spectrum, food and the consumption of it may have turned into their obsession or area of special interest, possibly leading to over-eating and weight gain. Please see the helpline's information sheet on Obsessions, repetitive behaviours and routines for further information.

Coping strategy

Naturally we all have in built ways of dealing with stress and difficult periods of our lives. Having to deal with the difficulties and differences ASD presents them with could have an effect on an individual's confidence. Some individuals may over-eat as a result of low self-esteem and see food as a source of comfort.

Sensory

Individuals on the spectrum can experience sensory integration dysfunction, which could have an effect on the volume of food intake. An individual may have a particular craving for a specific food, because it may be providing them with sensory satisfaction.

Strategies for controlling over-eating and weight gain

It is important to stress that all of the following ideas are just suggestions and what works for one individual may not work for another. With any approach used it is important that instructions to the individual are clear, consistent and are delivered in a calm manner.

Adapt the environment

Limit accessibility to food by keeping it in secure, out of reach places

Put locks on fridges and cupboards

Use visuals to remind individuals of out of bounds areas - No entry signs on cupboards and fridges.

Communication

Presenting information visually can assist in an individual's understanding and processing of information relating to diet and healthy eating. This can assist in setting clear rules surrounding food intake.

For example:

- Produce clear daily and/or weekly menus of foods - display the time of next meal in a prominent position.
- Show them the empty saucepan to assist with understanding. Confirm verbally that the food has all gone.
- Set rules relating to restaurants and food shops. If you have a starter you cannot have a pudding.
- Use visuals to reinforce and assist with the understanding about a healthy diet.
- Have a food chart which lists both healthy and unhealthy foods. The rule is they must have one food from the healthy list once a day.
- Use visual emotional tools - this will provide the individual with the opportunity to express their needs.

Social stories

Social stories have been found to be an effective approach in providing individuals on the spectrum with factual information. A social story could help the individual to understand why we eat and the function of food. They can also be used to indicate the need to eat a variety of foods, both healthy and unhealthy. Educate the individual about healthy eating by giving clear information. An individual may have difficulty relating good nutrition to what they actually eat.

For example:

- Food provides us with fuel/power, which enables us to do things we enjoy. Healthy food gives us energy and unhealthy foods can make us tired.

Managing the obsession

Depending upon the level and degree of the obsession, it is important that you focus on trying to manage it without causing the individual any additional distress and/or anxiety. Through the food diary you will hopefully gain a valuable insight into the level of the obsession and hopefully the best possible way of managing it. Below are basic factors, which you may consider.

- Clear and consistent guidelines may need to be set around the times food is eaten (7.00pm), the amount of food eaten (one plate full) and the location (the kitchen table) of where food is eaten.
- It may be appropriate to channel the obsession into something positive such as cooking and producing recipes.
- Please note the ways of managing and dealing with obsessions are very varied, so please refer to the [\[Obsessions, repetitive behaviours and routines\]](#) information sheet, available from the Autism, for more in-depth management strategies as well as seeking professional medical advice

Controlling the volume

Everyone has their own individual eating pattern. From the food diary, try and establish the times of the day the individual is eating and the volume of food being eaten at these times. For some it could be little and often others may have large portions at regular meal times or lots of snacks. So the focus needs to be on ways of managing the food intake.

For example:

- Use a smaller plate

- Try to do a food timetable. You can have snacks at 11.00am, 3.00pm and 6.00pm (two healthy snacks and one unhealthy snack) reducing the amount of food intake gradually.

Encourage exercise

If an individual is overweight it is important to try and encourage activities which involve movement and exercise in order to try and assist them with their weight loss.

For example:

- Trampolining, swimming, walking, cycling.

Counselling

If an individual is turning to food as a source of comfort then it is important that they see a professional to help them to tackle the issues they may have which are leading them to be unhappy. Counselling may provide individuals with the opportunity to develop and understand their emotions. Hopefully, this will help them to improve their self-esteem and self-confidence.

** Please note there is a specific disorder, Prader Willi syndrome, which relates to individuals not being able to control their eating. Please see contact details if you require any further information on this condition.*

Professionals who may be able to help

Over-eating and weight gain can lead to medical problems. It is therefore necessary if the problems persist to contact your GP about the situation. The GP may then refer them onto one or more of the following professionals.

- Dietician/Nutritionist - they offer advice on healthy eating and produce programmes to assist in both weight gain and loss
- Eating disorder clinic
- Clinical psychologist or psychiatrist - if the problem is thought to be psychological they can help implement cognitive and behaviour strategies
- Paediatricians - are experts in child health issues and can help provide solution to the dietary problems
- Occupational therapist - may be able to offer advice on the family management of the situation
- Dentist - an individual's eating difficulties may result in poor dental hygiene management or toothache
- Counsellor - is an individual who is trained to talk through a variety of issues.

Children with special needs can take longer to learn how to eat independently. Read these top tips for mealtimes.

Eating a meal can be particularly challenging for children who have disabilities. A lack of fine motor skills (like finding it hard to hold a fork), sensory restrictions (like being paralysed or unable to see) and co-ordination difficulties are some of the many reasons that may delay the learning process. This can be frustrating for you and your child.

Author Deborah French has four children, two of whom have special needs. Her eldest daughter, Amariah, has Down syndrome and her son, Henry, has autism spectrum disorder.

"Socialising with others generally includes eating together," she says. "So learning how to eat neatly is crucial to helping our children to integrate."

Deborah, who also runs cookery classes for children with special needs, came to realise that nagging her children about their table manners wasn't working. Instead, she developed practical solutions to help them learn, with rapid results.

Deborah's top tips for happy mealtimes

Be patient

When stress or frustration controls your reactions while trying to teach your child, they will reflect your mood and act accordingly. They will fear your reaction to their mistakes and as a result will not be able to give their best efforts. Give instructions calmly, with positive reinforcement."

Invest in a funky child-sized apron

"As your child gets older, even though it may still be necessary for them to wear a bib to protect their clothing, this can also be demoralising and embarrassing in front of other family members or peers. An apron is more discreet and will help eliminate any negative feelings your child may harbour before mealtime has even begun."

Encourage your child to help lay the table

"Irrespective of the nature of your child's disability, take the time to involve them in preparing the table for dinner. Even watching you collect cutlery, cups and napkins helps your child to feel they have participated. During this process talk your child through what you are doing and why. For example: 'We use a fork to pick up pieces of food on our plate instead of our fingers. That way the fork gets dirty and not our fingers!'"

Use heavy cutlery and solid crockery

"As parents, we instinctively opt for plastic or disposable utensils to avoid breakage and to make cleaning up easier. But for a child who has either low or high muscle tone or difficulty with their fine motor skills, a plastic fork simply feels like air. These children need to be able to feel the cutlery they are holding. The same is true for plastic plates and cups, which are unstable and easily knocked over. Solid cutlery and crockery will make it easier to teach your child how to eat."

Take the time to eat with your child

"If you eat your evening meal later than your child, compromise by ensuring that during your child's mealtime, you too are seated at the table. Even if you enjoy your coffee or a smaller version of what your child is eating, they will be encouraged by your presence. You can then talk about your food and how you eat with your cutlery. Take note of how quickly your child imitates your actions."

Keep a standalone mirror and wet cloth handy

"The most effective way of teaching self-awareness to a child is to let them view themselves. Even as adults, how often after enjoying a meal with friends have we been unaware that a chunk of food, usually green in colour, has become wedged between our front teeth?"

"Apply this theory when helping your child to understand food residue on their face after eating. Before they leave the table, place the mirror in front of them and encourage them to look at their reflection and clean themselves using the wet cloth."

Encourage your child to clear their place

"Again, irrespective of your child's disability, teach them how to participate in the cleaning up process after eating according to their ability. This may involve them handing their plate to you or taking it to the side to be washed; alternatively wiping their place clean as best they can. Any level of participation helps to develop their self-awareness and obligations at mealtimes.

"It's important to remember that everyone likes to feel valued and needed. When you give your child responsibilities, they feel important to you and the family. This in turn boosts their self-confidence and speeds up the learning process."

Specialist eating and drinking equipment

To help your child learn good eating skills, you may find that specialist eating or drinking equipment will make a real difference. The Caroline Walker Trust, a food charity, recommends a number of helpful aids to eating that parents of children with learning disabilities may find useful for their child.

These include:

- **Different shaped cups**, with one or two handles, of different weights, materials, transparencies and designs. The cups should be designed not to shatter or break if they are bitten.
- **A transparent cup** can be helpful when helping someone to drink, because you can see how much liquid they're taking.
- **Cutlery of differing shapes, sizes, depths and materials.** Again, the cutlery shouldn't shatter if it is bitten. Solid plastic cutlery or plastic-coated metal might be better for people who have a bite reflex when cutlery is placed in their mouth. Shorter-handled cutlery is easier to manage and handgrips or irregularly shaped handles may help someone in using a utensil.
- **Plates and bowls that do not slip**, have higher sides to prevent spillage, or are angled to make access to food easier.
- **Insulated crockery** that keeps food hot if mealtimes are lengthy.
- **Non-slip mats** that support crockery.
- **Straws**, which can help those with a weaker suck and can have different widths.
- **Feeding systems** that deliver food to the diner's mouth through, for example, a rotating plate and a mechanical or electronically controlled spoon. Some systems are powered, others are hand- or foot-operated.