Washington State Department of HEALTH

INSTITUTE ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENT & DISABILITY
UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

Caregiver Guide for Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) and Pediatric Feeding Disorder (PFD)

Many children go through a period of selective eating during early childhood. For some children, however, eating challenges are more serious and affect health, growth, or daily life. This guide explains when to be concerned, what these feeding challenges mean, and how to find support.

When is picky eating a concern?

Picky eating may be a concern when it begins to interfere with your child's health, development, or family life. You may want to seek support if 1 or more of the following are true:

- Your child is not meeting their nutrition needs through food.
- Your child needs special help to eat, such as:
  - Distractions to go through meals
  - Special cups or utensils
  - Foods or drinks prepared in a certain way that is not typical for their age
- Mealtimes cause extreme stress or worry.
- Your child's eating habits limits their or your family's social activities.
- You need extra support feeding your child because of their eating behaviors.

What do ARFID and PFD mean?

Eating behaviors once described as extreme picky eating, oral aversion, or sensory sensitivity may now be recognized as **Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) or pediatric feeding disorder (PFD).**

A child has PFD when how they eat is not typical for their age, and they have ongoing difficulty in 1 or more of these areas:

- **Health**
- **Growth**
- **Nutrition**
- **Feeding skills**
- **Social interactions**
- **Behaviors or emotions related to food or eating**

With ARFID, the feeding challenges are not caused by problems with the child's feeding skills or health but rather caused by a lack of interest in food, sensory sensitivity, or worry about negative consequences of eating.

Understanding more about these challenges can help families understand what they mean and where to seek support.

More on Pediatric Feeding Disorder

Fast Facts

- **An estimated 1 in 23 to 1 in 37 of children under age 5 in the United States have pediatric feeding disorder**
- **Infants can have pediatric feeding disorder**
- **Although ARFID and pediatric feeding disorder involve restricted eating, they do not include negative body image issues or desire to lose weight**
- **Treatment usually consists of a team approach that assesses a child's: physical health, feeding skills, nutrition, and social interactions around food**

What may lead to ARFID or PFD?

These feeding difficulties can affect anyone at any age. While the exact cause is unknown, research suggests possible contributing factors may include:

- Medical conditions that make eating difficult or painful.
- Sensory processing differences that make eating unpleasant or uncomfortable.
- A traumatic event or negative experience with eating that makes food feel unsafe or scary.

How can caregivers help?

While every child is different, caregivers can support children with feeding challenges by focusing on safety, routine, and reducing pressure around food.

Helpful strategies include:

- Respect your child's hunger and fullness cues. Avoid pressure or force feeding.
- Help your child come to mealtime in a calm state. Helping yourself get to a calm state first helps. Make meals pleasant in ways that work best for your family. Try not to focus on how much your child eats.
- Offer meals or snacks on a regular schedule.
- If your child does not eat or eats very little at a meal or snack, another opportunity will come at a predictable time.
- Include at least 1 food your child is likely to eat at every meal or snack.
- Meet with a health care provider to discuss whether nutrition supplementation is necessary to support growth.
- Remember that there is an underlying reason for your child's feeding challenges, even if it is not always clear.
- Your child is doing their best with eating, just as you are with feeding.

When and where to get help?

Talk to your child's pediatrician if you would like a referral for support around feeding. They can help decide on next steps and may refer you to:

- A feeding team, which is a group of healthcare professionals that addresses feeding challenges as a multidisciplinary team.
- A registered dietitian, who can see if your child is meeting their nutrition needs and help find ways to fill gaps
- A medical specialist, such as a gastroenterologist (GI) or an ear, nose, and throat specialist (ENT). These specialists may run tests to see if your child's eating challenges may be due to digestion or swallow issues.
- A feeding therapist, who can be an occupational therapist (OT), speech language pathologist (SLP), behavioral analyst (BCBA), or psychologist who specializes in feeding. OTs and SLPs address oral motor skill development, sensory processing, and adaptive skills, and BCBAs and psychologists address feeding behavior.

Early support can make a meaningful difference for children and families.

Services for children in Washington

Families in Washington have access to more support based on their child's age.

From birth to age 3, families can self refer to Birth to 3 services for a feeding evaluation through:

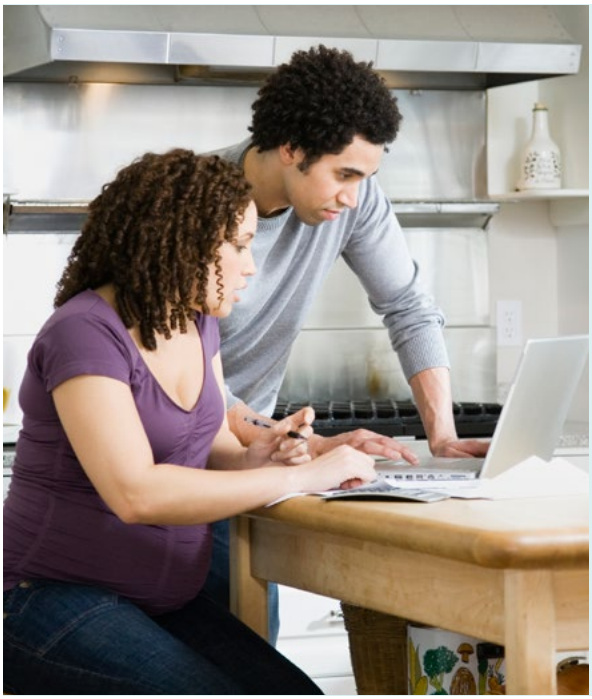
- Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT) from Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families
- WithinReach Help Me Grow Washington: Call (800) 322-2588

For children ages 3 and older

Families can find a feeding team or a dietitian trained to work with children with special health care needs on the Nutrition Network Washington website. Most feeding teams and dietitians will require a referral from your child's pediatrician.

If you're uncertain whether your child's feeding is a concern, Feeding Matters has developed the following screening tool for children ages 0-4.

AFRID and Pediatric Feeding Disorder (PFD) are caused by many factors and may impact the whole family. While shame and blame can be common feelings, caregivers are encouraged to be kind to themselves



Resources

Feedingmatters.org
Information about ARFID, PFD, screening questionnaire, caregiver support resources, provider directory

NutritionnetworkWA.org
Find a dietitian who works with children with special health care needs, find a feeding team

doh.wa.gov/WIC
WIC program provides access to skilled dietitians and healthy food for eligible families with children under age 5.

Ellynsatterinstitute.org
How to feed from babies to teens, how to develop a positive feeding relationship

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