

Q. Do other families deal with difficulties around feeding their child with autism?

A. Yes. Many parents say they struggle with their child at meal time. Color, texture, and how the food looks influences whether a child with autism will eat a particular food. For example, they may like dry, crunchy foods and refuse to eat foods that have soft, smooth textures, like mashed potatoes and cooked cereals. They may also not like a change in routine (substitute teacher serving food, different plate, etc.) and refuse to eat because of the change.

Q. How do I help my child eat well?

A. Though children with autism tend to grow normally in terms of height and weight, they may not get all the nutrition they need. If you have concerns about how your child with autism eats, talk with your child's medical provider. They may refer your child to a registered dietitian who can assess your child's diet.

Your **Children with Special Health Care Needs Coordinator** may be able to help you find a registered dietitian in your area. Visit www.doh.wa.gov/cfh/mch/documents/CoordLst.pdf.

The **American Dietetic Association** web site may also help you. If your child receives services from the Women, Infant and Child (WIC) Nutrition Program, you can talk with your WIC dietitian about your concerns. Visit www.EatRight.org/Public/.

A team approach may best address some feeding difficulties. Your child's medical provider may make a referral to a feeding team. A feeding team includes feeding therapists, behavior specialists, registered dietitians and others. Washington State has 18 **Community Feeding Teams**. Learn more at <http://depts.washington.edu/cshcnut/feeding/index.html>.

Q. Will my child's school help in following an eating plan?

A. If your child is under age three and participates in an early intervention program, you may have an eating plan as part of their **Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)**. If your child receives special education services, you may have an eating plan as part of their **Individual Education Plan (IEP)**. Either plan can incorporate the suggestions from a registered dietitian and/or feeding team. Learn more at www.del.wa.gov/development/esit/services.aspx and www.k12.wa.us/specialed/families/IEPs/default.aspx.

Q. I have heard from parents that their child's behavior improved when put on a special diet. What do they involve?

A. Some parents report that removing certain foods from their child's diet reduces autism specific behaviors. However, no scientific evidence at this time supports that these diets work. Talk with your child's medical provider if you want to change your child's diet. Some parents of children with autism have tried the following diets:*

- **Casein-free diet** removes milk and all foods that have milk in them from the diet.

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- **Gluten-free diet** removes certain grains and all foods made with grains that have gluten protein from the diet.
- **Specific carbohydrate diet** removes specific carbohydrates including all grains, lactose and sucrose from the diet, and limits vegetables and fruits.
- **Specific vitamin-mineral supplements** added to the diets of some children with autism.

A restrictive diet may cause a child to not get enough nourishment. Also, many vitamins, minerals and supplements are made for adults. Giving an adult dose of a vitamin, mineral or other supplement to a child may be dangerous, even if the product label says “natural.” Talk with your child’s doctor before giving any type of supplement to your child.

Special diets are often difficult to follow, cost extra, take more time to prepare, and may not provide all the nutrition a child needs, especially with selective eaters. If you choose to follow a specific diet plan, talk with a registered dietitian.

****Diet Definitions:***

Casein – a protein found in animal milk (like cow and goat); not soy or rice milk

Gluten – a combination of proteins found in many grains, such as wheat, barley, rye; the use of gluten as a food additive in the form of a flavoring, stabilizing or thickening agent.

Carbohydrates – starch or sugar found in many foods such as grains, cereals, bread and pasta or candy, jams and desserts

Lactose – milk sugar

Sucrose – sugar

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