

What is Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) in children with neurodevelopmental conditions?

Children with neurodevelopmental conditions (e.g., autism, cerebral palsy, global developmental delay) can have eating difficulties from an early age. These eating difficulties are often different from those of typically developing children.



In children with neurodevelopmental conditions, eating difficulties range from picky eating in the milder form to restricted eating at its extreme. Children with restricted eating who eat a very limited number of foods may be at risk of malnutrition.



Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder, also known as ARFID, is a medical condition. Children with ARFID are not picky eaters. ARFID is not caused by parents, caregivers, or their environment.

Children with ARFID may avoid food because of:

- Sensory reasons (e.g., texture, taste, temperature, colour)
- Limited interest in eating or lack of awareness of hunger cues
- Experiences that made them more fearful of eating (e.g., choking)

You may have tried many commonly recommended feeding strategies and feel frustrated if they have not worked for your child. You may experience increased stress or anxiety related to your child's eating difficulties. Many children with ARFID will need tailored support for their eating difficulties so that they can attend daycare or school and participate in meaningful activities.



ARFID is a condition your child will have throughout their life. With tailored strategies, clinicians can help you manage your child's condition and support your family's health and wellbeing.

How is ARFID different from picky eating in children with neurodevelopmental conditions?

Children with ARFID may:

- Eat a very limited number of foods (e.g., less than 10)
- Not be able to maintain a weight or height typical for their age
- Use supplements to get nutrients (instead of from food)
- Use a feeding tube to get some or all of their nutrition
- Have been treated in hospital for nutrition or hydration concerns
- Have challenges in attending daycare/school or participating in social activities
- Have not responded to traditional feeding strategies

Children with picky eating may:

- Eat a small variety of foods (e.g., often at least 30 different foods)
- Eat foods from a variety of food groups
- Prefer to eat familiar foods, are reluctant to try new foods, and have strong food preferences
- Have preferences that are likely to change over time with exposure to different foods
- Tolerate a variety of food textures
- Be able to have new foods on their plate and try them
- Respond to traditional feeding strategies (e.g., stop offering preferred foods, wait for your child to feel hungry) over time



This handout is part of the NDD Restrictive Eating Clinic Information Series:
www.hollandbloorview.ca/RestrictiveEatingInfo

References

- Archibald, T., & Bryant-Waugh, R. (2022). Current evidence for avoidant restrictive food intake disorder: Implications for clinical practice and future directions. *JCPP Advances*, 3(e12160), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcv2.12160>
- Bourne, L., Mandy, W., & Bryant-Waugh, R. (2021). Avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder and severe food selectivity in children and young people with autism: A scoping review. *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*, 64, 691-699. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dmcn.15139>
- Smile, S., Raffaele, C., & Perlin, R. (2021). Re-imagining the physicians' role in the assessment of feeding challenges in children with autism spectrum disorder. *Paediatrics and Child Health*, 26(2), e73–e77. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/pxaa008>
- Taylor, C. M., Wernimont, S. M., Northstone, K., & Emmett, P. M. (2015). Picky/fussy eating in children: Review of definitions, assessment, prevalence and dietary intakes. *Appetite*, 95, 349-359. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2015.07.026>
- Toomey, K. A. (2010). Picky Eaters versus Problem Feeders. *Feeding Matters*. https://www.feedingmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/picky_eaters-vs-problem-feeders.pdf