

Patient Information

Top Tips for Managing Mealtimes

Changing meal time rules

Having a routine at meal times means your children know what to expect. There may be some resistance to change, but stay strong. It will be worth it in the long run!

Having (roughly) regular mealtimes and sitting down to eat, gives children a routine and lets them know that eating anything, anywhere, anytime isn't helpful.

Keep things simple by offering 3 balanced meals a day and healthy snacks in between. If the children refuse what you offer, take it away without comment and don't offer any alternatives until the next planned meal or snack.

Taking time over meals is sociable, but don't let them drag on for too long. If plates aren't cleared within 30 minutes, it's best to move on. If you've got a healthy pudding based on fruit or dairy planned this can be offered even if the first course wasn't finished.

Engaging children with food

Increase children's interest in food by involving them in menu planning, shopping and cooking. You could ask them to lay the table, pour the drinks or clear the table.

Encouraging positive behaviour

Praise any good behaviour at meal times, and although hard, ignore any bad behaviour. Children love attention so by focusing on the positives, rather than the negatives, you will encourage the good behaviour more often.

Rewards can help children to adapt to new routines at meal times. Younger children love star charts, older children might prefer collecting points towards agreed rewards. Avoid using food as a reward though as it gives the impression that some foods are better than others.

Reducing distractions

Try to sit down and eat together as a family without the distraction of games, computers and TV whenever you can. The children will love having your attention and it's a great time to chat and find out what sort of day everyone's had, even if you are not eating yourself.

Eating at a table is ideal, but if you don't have one don't worry. You can still have a sociable mealtime by putting your meals on trays and switching off the telly.

Listening to their bodies

It takes about 15-20 minutes for our brains to register we've eaten, so if we eat very quickly we can eat too much before realising we've overeaten. Try to encourage your children to take their time over meals and spend a bit of time chatting. By this time it may be easier to persuade them they don't need seconds.

Re-visiting foods

Tastes do change so persevere with offering different foods to your children. Just because they didn't like it a year ago doesn't mean they won't like it now. If your child is very reluctant to try new foods then rewards can certainly help (but don't use food as a reward).