



A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND PROFESSIONALS

NEURODIVERSITY AND EATING DISORDERS

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF ARFID?

Children with ARFID fall within at least one of three main categories:

May have strong negative reactions to smells, tastes, textures, or colors of foods. They may be highly fearful of new foods and have had negative experiences related to unfamiliar foods.

May have an overall lack of interest in eating and have a very low appetite. They may find eating minimally enjoyable or not at all.

Are afraid of what might happen when they eat; for example, having had frightening experiences like pain, an allergic reaction, choking, or vomiting food.

Eating disorders are complex mental health conditions that affect individuals across all ages, genders, and backgrounds. Neurodivergent children and youth may be at increased risk of exhibiting disordered eating behaviours or developing an eating disorder.

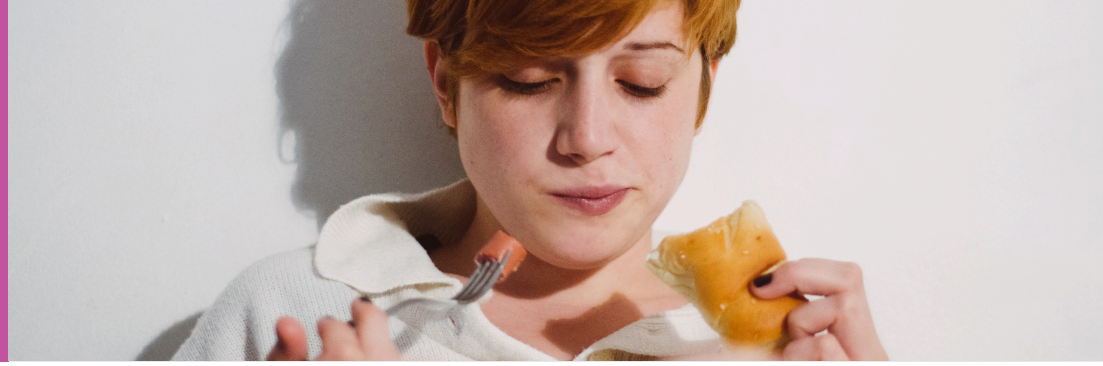
Understanding Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variations in the human brain that influence learning, attention, mood, socialization, and sensory experiences. Some more recognized types of neurodivergence include Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Neurodivergent individuals may experience unique challenges especially when it comes to nutrition and eating behaviors. It is important to recognize when your child's eating behaviors could be signaling a more serious problem than "just picky eating".

What are the Warning Signs to Look For?

- Avoidance of entire food groups or rigid eating behaviours or patterns
- Intense anxiety around mealtimes or eating in front of others
- Ritualistic food behaviors (e.g., eating foods in a specific order, separating food items)
- Highly sensitive reactions to food (e.g., texture, taste, shape, smell, colour)
- Emotional or physical distress or shutdowns related to food
- Challenges with socializing because of the above eating behaviors
- Your own extreme distress and frustration in trying to understand and manage your child's challenging behaviors

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Did you know?

IT'S NORMAL FOR KIDS TO PREFER PROCESSED FOODS—THEY ARE CONSISTENT IN TASTE, TEXTURE, AND SMELL, WHICH CAN FEEL SAFE AND COMFORTING

WHAT PROBLEMS CAN OCCUR WITH ARFID?

ARFID may lead to physical health problems from poor nutrition. Kids with the disorder may:

- Not get enough vitamins, minerals, and protein leading to nutritional deficiencies
- May lose weight when expected to be gaining weight
- Do not grow as expected leading to delayed puberty
- May be using supplements to maintain weight
- May lead to medical instability

Could my Child have Avoidant Restrictive Feeding Intake Disorder (ARFID)?

Avoidant Restrictive Feeding Intake Disorder (ARFID) is a type of eating disorder where individuals limit the amount and/or variety of foods they eat. But unlike the other eating disorders, food avoidance or restriction is not related to distress about body shape, size or weight. Instead, in ARFID, selective eating is motivated by a lack of interest in eating or food, sensory sensitivity (e.g., strong reactions to taste, texture, smell of foods), and/or a fear of negative consequences (e.g., of choking, vomiting, or having an allergic reaction). Neurodivergent children are more likely to exhibit signs of ARFID.

Supporting a Neurodivergent Child

1 Validate Their Experience

Acknowledge that their challenges with food are real and not “just being difficult.” It is important to avoid judgment or pressure to “just try harder.”

2 Role Model

Model healthy mealtime habits for your child. Serve and eat a variety of foods without the expectation that they must try everything. When the child has an opportunity to see others eat and enjoy the foods presented it can reduce their anxiety around trying the food themselves.

3 Collaborate, Don't Control

Involve your child in decision-making around shopping, cooking, and meal preparation. Offer limited choices to not overwhelm but to respect autonomy wherever possible.

4 Find Neurodiversity-Affirming Professionals

Seek support from clinicians who are trained in both eating disorders and neurodivergence. Standard treatment approaches may need adapting to meet your child's communication and sensory needs.

5 Adjust the Environment

Make mealtimes predictable, calming, and sensory-friendly. Avoid overwhelming settings and try not to make food a battleground. This will only make eating more challenging for your child.

6 Focus on Safety, Not Weight

Support recovery through nourishment, self-understanding, and emotional regulation, not appearance or weight gain alone.

For more info:

embodybc.com
heretohelp.ca

EmbodyBC equips parents and professionals with trusted resources to support young people before they develop an eating disorder. Embody is a provincial program of Family Services of the North Shore, and one of the six BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information.