Help! My Child Will Not Eat!

CF Care Center Providers,

We are pleased to announce that behavior and nutrition handouts described in Table III “Routine monitoring and care recommendations for the infant diagnosed with cystic fibrosis” in the CF Foundation Evidenced-Based Guidelines for Management of Infants with Cystic Fibrosis were published in The Journal of Pediatrics December supplement (JPediatr 2009;155(6);S73-93). These guidelines are also available in the Resource section of Port CF. The central purpose of these handouts is to provide parents of children with CF (ages 4 months to just after 2 years) with basic nutrition and behavior management information and recommendations. They are to be used in conjunction with face to face discussion with parents or family members. We anticipate that the handouts will also provide parents with a sense of validation that these challenges are a normal part of development for all children.

We hope that parents will find the information in the handouts helpful in reinforcing discussions in clinic as they work to ensure their child with CF receives appropriate nutrition. While these resources will not be sufficient alone, they will provide them with anticipatory guidance about nutrition and mealtime behavior management. The handouts will also set the stage for parents to discuss nutrition and mealtime behavior concerns with the CF team perhaps earlier than they would have in the past.

Help! My Child Will Not Eat!

Purpose: To provide parents of children at almost any age with specific recommendations for managing picky eating or food refusal.

Topics addressed:

1. Children with CF may be eating as much as other children without CF, but it still not enough.

2. The value in boosting calories of foods.

3. Concerns that parents often have about their child’s eating.

4. What parents usually do about food refusal, that often does not work in the long-term.

5. Specific recommendations for what behaviors to attend to (and not attend to)

6. Specific recommendations for how to respond to various mealtime behaviors.

7. The importance in consistency in responses and expectations from others who eat with the child.
Help! My Child Will Not Eat!

You are not alone. Many parents of young children feel that their child does not eat enough. Most research has found that children with cystic fibrosis (CF) eat just as much as children without CF. However, research has also found that children with CF are not eating enough to meet CF calorie needs. It is normal to want your child to eat more, but it is hard to get a child to eat a larger amount of food. That is why it is important to add calories by using things like oil, butter, margarine, cream, and dipping sauces (such as cheese sauce or creamy dips). You can also choose foods that have more calories per bite.

Other common eating worries (reported by parents of children with CF):

- Picky eating
- Being distracted during mealtime (playing with food or asking questions)
- Crabby about food, throwing food
- Refusing to eat

What parents of all young children commonly and naturally do about these behaviors:

- Prompt child to eat
- Ask questions about why child is not eating
- Coax child to eat by making “deals”
- Feed child
- Become frustrated!

Caution: We know these responses do not usually help a child eat more or more quickly. These seem to make it more fun not to eat because it is so fun to get their parent’s attention.

What to try instead:

1. Watch your child. Ask yourself: Is my child eating?

   The way that you react to your child’s behavior at mealtime teaches her what you want her to do. Your child will learn what to do (and not to do) more quickly if you react one way when she is eating, and a different way when she is not eating. For example, if your child is praised for eating, she will probably spend more time eating. In fact, if your child starts to learn that the way to get your attention is to eat, she might try new foods, eat more of what you serve, and eat more quickly!

   Behaviors that can be considered part of “eating” are:
   - Coming to the table when told
   - Being helpful when taking enzymes
   - Staying in the chair
   - Picking up a utensil
   - Putting food on the utensil
   - Taking a bite
   - Taking a BIG bite
   - Taking one bite after another
   - Trying a new food

2. If your child is eating: Praise your child. This creates positive family mealtime and builds the child’s self-confidence. After all, who doesn’t like praise and attention!

   - Be specific. Tell your child EXACTLY what she did that you liked.
   - Be excited. Make eating seem like a big deal.
   - Show love. Children love a pat on the back, kisses, and hugs.

   Here are some examples to help get you started:
   “You came to the table when mommy asked. I love that!”
   “You took your enzymes so fast! Great job!”
   “You picked up your fork! Yahoo!”
   “Daddy loves it when you take one bite after another!”
   “Good job drinking your milk. That will make you big and strong.”

3. If your child is not eating: Do not react.

   - Stay calm.
   - Look at another member of your family or your plate.
   - Do not talk to your child until she takes a bite, then PRAISE HER RIGHT AWAY!
• Eating behaviors to ignore
  • Looking around the room
  • Taking a long time between bites
  • Lots and lots of talking (such as grumbles or questions) that gets in the way of eating
  • Playing or throwing food

4. Prepare others who eat with your family at mealtime.
  • Make sure that everyone eating at the table knows ahead of time how to respond to your child’s behavior during mealtimes. This may include siblings, other family members, neighbors, or friends.
  • Tell them to watch how you give him praise for eating, and remove attention when your child is not eating.
  • Getting different responses from people will confuse your child and slow down his ability to learn what is expected at mealtime.

TALK WITH YOUR CF CENTER

Talk to your CF center at every visit about your child’s eating. Your CF dietitian can help you make food choices, add calories, get your child to eat, and make mealtime fun. They can also help you if you are having problems. The earlier you ask the better! Good eating habits start at a young age and last a lifetime. If your child does not eat well for two or three days you should talk with your CF care center or your primary care doctor.