

PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

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Special Diets

REMEMBER:

- *Encourage all children to understand their food needs.*
- *Teach children with food intolerances the link between certain foods and their reactions.*
- *Planning is important when diets need to be restricted for health reasons.*
- *Encourage children to self-manage and learn to be independent.*

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There are many reasons why children have restricted or special diets. Managing children's responses to particular foods and dietary restrictions can be quite challenging for parents. The focus of this info sheet is on how to manage diet restrictions for health reasons.

REASONS FOR DIETARY RESTRICTIONS

Children commonly may restrict their own diets on whims as they assert their independence. Sometimes a child may choose to only eat certain foods and here it is a parent's job to offer a range of foods to try to broaden their diet (please see our info sheet on fussy eaters for other tips).

For other children their diet may be restricted for health reasons, ranging from mild intolerances to life-threatening anaphylactic reactions★ to particular foods or ingredients. Sometimes controlling food intake can also be a component of managing children's behaviour.

Food intolerances are not usually life threatening but can drastically reduce a person's quality of life. Many people would prefer a limited diet to dealing with the symptoms#. Very young children may actively choose to go without a food they like to avoid some unpleasant symptom, such as itchy skin.

For people with an anaphylactic reaction, the experience is so negative it is natural for them to want to avoid that trigger. Other children with intolerance to certain foods may not have the ability to self-manage their food intake, especially if they really enjoy that particular food. Parents in this situation may have a particular challenge to manage their child's diet.

★ *The most severe type of reaction — anaphylaxis — can progress rapidly with breathing difficulty (from swelling of the throat or severe asthma), allergic shock and collapse, and can be life-threatening if not treated immediately with adrenaline (epinephrine) by injection. In the most sensitive people with a food allergy, tiny amounts of the food (pin-head sized) can be enough to provoke a severe reaction. (RPAH Allergy Clinic 2010)*

Symptoms triggered by food chemical intolerances vary from person to person. The most common are recurrent hives and swellings, headaches, sinus trouble, mouth ulcers, nausea, stomach pains and bowel irritation. Some people feel vaguely unwell, with flu-like aches and pains, or get unusually tired, run-down or moody, often for no apparent reason.

Children can become irritable and restless, and behavioural problems can be aggravated in those with nervous system disorders such as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). Even breast-fed babies can have food intolerance reactions due to chemicals from the mother's diet getting into the breast milk, causing colicky irritable behaviour, loose stools, eczema and nappy (diaper) rashes. (RPAH Allergy Clinic 2010)

TIPS FOR MANAGING FOOD ISSUES

Research has shown that there are many benefits to having a positive attitude around food issues and caregivers should aim to set up meal times in such a way that they are relaxed events.

This can be difficult to manage when a child is on a restricted diet. Some general rules apply when trying to ensure that meal times run smoothly.

Children should be encouraged to understand their food needs.

Teaching children about foods to have every day and those 'sometimes' foods can be expanded for food intolerances.

As food intolerances are dose related it is helpful to teach children that they may tolerate one exposure, but several at the same time will make them sick and unable to listen, regardless of their particular reaction to the food.

Teach children the link between food intolerance and their reactions.

It may take children a long time to make the association between certain foods and a particular reaction. Asking them to tune in to their bodies when they are experiencing symptoms can help them learn.

Offer questions and prompts such as "how does your skin feel...maybe next time your body will feel better if you ate fewer strawberries at one time".

Insight can take a long time to develop as the onset of symptoms may be very gradual and appear a long time after the exposure.

One strategy is teaching children to plan ahead by "saving" their exposures for a special occasion and limiting their exposures before the event.

Food intolerances can stimulate the bladder and bowel. If children are taught to recognise that they wet their pants if they eat certain foods, they often choose to not risk that experience and avoid the food all together.

Other families chose to eat the trigger foods on a Friday night so the children have the greatest recovery time before returning to school.

Ideally, people of all ages should monitor their own food intake.

It can be difficult for parents to 'let go' and help their children take more responsibility for managing the food they eat. When special diets are needed or where parents are very mindful of their children's nutritional needs, this can become more challenging.

However it is important to encourage independence in children in managing their food intake. Parents can't always be there, and children need to have the skills to negotiate a range of social situations around food and eating.

Younger children in particular tend to be good at knowing what their bodies need (and don't need) and will often eat accordingly. It is important to encourage this skill and self-awareness, balanced with caring for your child's nutrition.

The more restricted the diet is, the more planning is needed by all involved.

It is important to have suitable meals and snacks available. Frequently people manage well when at home but struggle when at the shops or dealing with school lunches. Always have some appropriate things on hand.

Recognise that at times you may need to compromise if you can not manage best nutrition and suitable food sometimes you make a choice which you go for.

For example, a packet of chips from the allowed list may be better than dealing with a hungry child or feeding them unsuitable food.

If your family or your child is going to a friend's house, offer to take the appropriate food or suggest easy alternatives to your host.

Sleepovers provide an added dimension as they often involve several meals. Where possible send food that all the children can share include some "treats".

When one family member has diet restrictions and others do not it is important to balance out the distribution of special foods.

For example a child on a restricted diet may have their pancakes several times a week and others only sometimes. Siblings may need to be reminded about the child with food limits having 'turns' to eat something the rest of the family are not having.

MANAGING DIETS OUTSIDE THE HOME

No one wants to be responsible for someone having a life threatening episode or adverse reaction to a food they have supplied. As food is such a social connector special steps need to be taken if a child has to have a limited diet.

Parents may often need to educate other people in the child's life about what a particular diet means.

For example, people may not know what a milk free diet really entails. Many brands of bread have milk in them and so milk free can also mean bread free.

Many schools and child focussed venues may be nut free but it is easy to forget that many foods have "hidden" nuts, such as chocolates and biscuits.

As managing food issues by necessity takes planning and clarification parents often feel frustrated explaining their child's diet over and over.

- Where possible it is better to deal with a situation in a matter-of-fact manner and minimise the attention drawn to the child and their diet.
- Children will probably not enjoy being singled out in front of others, so teaching them how to politely decline inappropriate food is preferable to expecting them to explain their diet.

- It can also be helpful to try to shift the focus towards foods that suit the child rather than what they are missing out on.

- Children love to share food - think of tiny toddlers offering their food to their caregivers.

Where possible it is good to have enough information to plan ahead so a treat can be found that is suitable for sharing. Consider non-edible treats to share such as bubbles, balloons and stickers.

- Think creatively about how food is presented. For example, children are more likely to drink water if it is in a special cup or served with a straw.

- For unexpected occasions it is good to have a supply of suitable, long-lasting treats to offer your child that can be produced when the situation arises.

Parents of children with diet restrictions may also feel judged when they offer a separate treat to what other children are eating. It is important to manage your own feelings about this and focus on what is important for your child and your family.

TEACHING CHILDREN TO SELF-MANAGE

Children need to be taught what food suits them and what does not, especially when some foods may give adverse reactions. As they grow they will manage their own diet more and more.

Adolescents often abandon their restricted diets and test their reactions, often choosing to tolerate symptoms for a period of time.

Frequently this trial and error leads them to return to the “foods that love their bodies” as they rediscover the impact of their food reactions on their lives.

It is important to remember that just because a food is on the allowed list it does not mean anyone has to eat it. People on restricted diets are just as entitled to say no to something because they do not need it or they are not hungry.

This can be very difficult to remember when you have gone to a lot of trouble to buy and prepare it so that you can offer it to them.

If you have any concerns about your child's diet and how to develop a safe eating plan we encourage you to see a dietician as they are the experts in this area.

Your GP can refer you to a dietician or you can contact your local community health centre and they should be able to help.

Teaching children to listen to their bodies is a skill for life. Recognising how much better they feel when given good food that suits them helps them have those positive connections.

Food is about having energy to think, play and grow. It is harder to do those things when symptoms of food intolerances take your focus.

RESOURCES

Determining whether a child has food intolerances is best done under the supervision of a specialised dietitian as it can be very complicated. Many of the larger Allergy Clinics (generally linked with hospitals) offer ongoing email support.

Useful websites include:

Royal Prince Alfred Allergy Clinic
www.allergy.net.au

Anaphylaxis Australia
<http://www.allergyfacts.org.au>