

Feeding your child with gastrointestinal problems



Why does my child have trouble eating?

Everyone must learn how to eat. It is a skill that begins to develop after birth. Sometimes, children with gastrointestinal (GI) problems have trouble eating. These children may:

- Need medical tests and procedures that are often done using the face and mouth. Children may find them painful or scary.
- Have feeding tubes rather than eat by mouth. This means they do not learn to eat, chew and swallow in the same way that most people do.
- Often learn to avoid eating or drinking. They have not learned that eating can be safe and enjoyable.
- Have trouble learning how to move the mouth for eating.

What are some GI problems that can lead to feeding problems?

There are many GI problems that can lead to feeding problems. They include:

- Gastroesophageal reflux (GERD or GE reflux)
- Constipation (hard, infrequent bowel movements)
- Necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC)
- Short bowel syndrome (SBS)
- Gastroschisis
- Congenital diaphragmatic hernia (CDH)

When can I feed my child?

Your child's doctor and care team will decide:

- When your child is ready and able to eat.
- What foods and drinks are safe for your child.

How can I help my child when they cannot eat?

When your child cannot eat, you can still teach them skills they will need when they begin to eat. This will also help teach them that not all things around the mouth are painful or scary.

Some tips to use with your child include:

- Give your baby a pacifier to suck on during the day. Be sure to use one during tube feedings.
- Teach them that mealtimes can be nice. Eat around the table as a family. Share good news of the day, and make sure they take part.
 - Hold your baby in your arms as if they are breast or bottle feeding.
 - Place your older child at the table in a highchair.
- Let your child watch you eat and touch your food.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Feeding your child with gastrointestinal problems, continued

- Offer your toddler kitchen utensils to play with. Give them wooden or plastic spoons and empty plastic cups.
- Let your child smell foods. This helps keep them from being sensitive to smells.
- Point out the color and shape of foods.
- Let your toddler play with wet or squishy toys. This helps keep them from being sensitive to touch.
- Gently wash your child's face, and brush their teeth or gums each day. Stay positive, and make it fun.

When your child is allowed to eat again:

- Limit distractions during mealtimes. Turn off the TV, tablets and cell phones.
- Limit mealtimes to 20 minutes. If your child has not eaten in 20 minutes, let them leave the table. If this happens often, call your child's doctor or feeding specialist.
- Do not force your child to eat or drink. Instead, give your child a rest.
 - If your baby gags on the bottle nipple, do not keep putting it in their mouth.
 - If your child gags or turns away from the spoon, do not keep putting it in their mouth.
 - If this happens often, call your child's doctor or feeding specialist. They can give you ideas about how to help your child.
- Teach your child to feed themselves if they are old enough.
- Praise your child for any interaction they have with food.

If you have questions or concerns about your child's feeding skills, talk with your child's doctor. Or, you may call the Rehabilitation department at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta at this phone number:

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This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.

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