

# Handling Food Refusal and Parenting Styles

During and after cancer treatments, children may start refusing to eat due to several side effects of treatment, such as:

- Suppressed appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Changes in taste and/or smell
- Soreness and/or pain in mouth or throat



Ongoing food refusal may contribute to the following consequences:



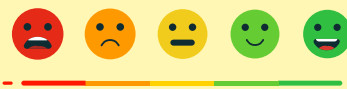
- Inadequate nutritional intake
- Parent and child distress during meal times and feeding

Addressing food refusal while your child is experiencing various side effects of cancer treatment can be challenging. However, it will be important to ensure that your child's nutritional needs are met so as to facilitate positive treatment outcomes.

**If your child is showing signs of food refusal, the strategies below may be helpful to encourage your child to eat:**

## 1 Validate your child's experiences and emotions

*E.g. fear towards eating due to physical discomfort*



- Explore with your child on what is making it difficult for them to accept food or certain types of food (e.g., food tastes different, soreness in mouth or throat).
- Demonstrate empathic listening and refrain from blaming your child for their current food refusal behaviours.
- Reassure your child that the treatment side effects are likely temporary and that you will be there to help them find ways to slowly resume their eating habits again.



## 2 Create positive experiences during meal times

- Dine together as a family at the dining table to increase interactions between family members and to help create a more comfortable and inviting setting for your child to dine in.
- Provide praise and positive reinforcement whenever your child is willing to try food or does not demonstrate resistance.
- Keep meal time duration to 30 minutes. Beyond this, children are unlikely to consume significantly more calories and it can result in a stressful experience for both parents and child.



### 3 Make eating fun

- Try out different versions of the same food.

#### EXAMPLE



Mashed potatoes



Baked potatoes

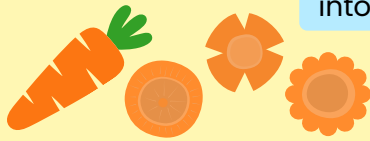


Stir-fried potatoes

- Present food in different forms.

#### EXAMPLE

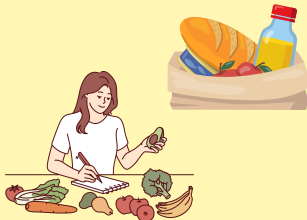
Cutting up carrots/bread into fun shapes



Decorate food on your child's plate using different ingredients

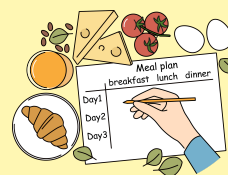
- Invite your child to participate in food-related activities, to build positive eating experiences without the pressure of eating.

#### Grocery packing



Food preparation

- Involve them in activities such as planning their own meals or engaging in age-appropriate tasks while preparing the food. This may increase their interest in the food that they have helped to prepare, which may enhance their willingness to try the food.



### 4 Vary the types of food tastes and variety

- Adjust the seasonings and flavours according to your child's symptoms. Introduce foods that are bland if your child finds strong tastes unappetizing or tends to feel nauseous towards strong smells.



- Conversely, offer foods with more flavours and seasonings if your child is experiencing taste changes. You can also experiment with a variety of different cooking methods and cuisines.

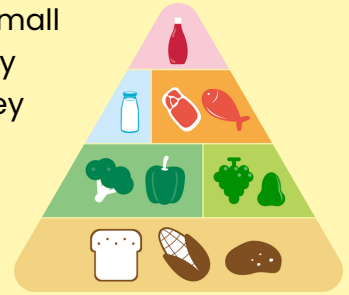
You can use some of the strategies in:

#### Theme 2, Issue 6: Navigating Taste Changes during Cancer Treatment



## 5 Remain patient and consistent

- It may be helpful to encourage your child to start with eating a small portion of the refused food, alongside food that they are currently willing to accept. Gradually increase the portions of food that they are willing to try and did not actively resist.
- Consistently offer healthy food and ingredients in their meals that are important for their nutrition and diet.



## 6 Pick your battles

- Focus on building positive exposures with food. Therefore, keep portions small and refill if they are keen, especially with new foods.
- If your child is experiencing weight loss, prioritize the consumption of high calorie foods and oral nutritional supplements as advised by your dietitian.



**Additionally, consider adapting your parenting styles, which could promote your child's receptiveness to improve their diet and nutritional status:**

## DO'S

### Engage in positive parenting practices

- Set consistent rules around meal times and foster a regular meal time routine for your child, while taking into account your child's needs and difficulties. You may need to review regularly and adapt the routine when necessary.

#### EXAMPLE

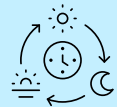
Breakfast

SNACK

LUNCH

SNACK

dinner



- Facilitate an increased sense of control for your child through offering them a curated range of food options to choose from within each food group, to ensure their nutritional needs are still met.



# DONT'S

## Refrain from engaging in permissive parenting styles

NEW!



- Avoid allowing your child to stick to a restricted diet or narrow range of food due to their preferences. Continue to encourage them to try new foods or increase their willingness to eat using the above strategies

## Refrain from engaging in an authoritarian parenting style

- Avoid forcing your child to try foods as that may further increase your child's food refusal through creating a negative association with food.
- Avoid forcing your child to finish all the food on their plate or scolding them for not finishing their food.



- Increase praise whenever your child is willing to try food and offer other food options if they still feel hungry.



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Gold symbolises the precious metal of the highest value, just like how precious our children are, so gold is the international colour to represent childhood cancer awareness. Gold is also the colour of strength, courage and resiliency.

