

# Food Jags

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## Overview

A food jag is a change in a child's usual eating habits. This can take the form of repeated requests to eat the same food at every meal. It can also be evidenced by the child refusing foods that he or she liked in the past. Food jags are commonly seen in children between the ages of 2 and 6 years.

## What is the information for this topic?

During the preschool years, children's growth slows down and their appetite tends to decrease. Children at this age are more interested in exploring the world around them than in the food they eat. This can cause concern for caregivers who want to be sure the child is eating enough.

Food jags can occur for a number of reasons. The child could be bored with the foods usually served. He or she may also be testing newfound independence.

Toddlers control very little in their environment. They soon find out how refusing foods or demanding the same foods over and over can upset their caregivers. These behaviors can then become a powerful tool for attention. The best way for a caregiver to handle a toddler's food jags is to remain low-key and not draw attention to the behavior.

The more focus the food jag receives, the longer it may last.

It is the caregiver's job to offer healthy and nutritious foods. It is also the caregiver's job to plan meals at the right times. However, the child is not helped by a caregiver who is

either too rigid or too lenient. Also, children should not be forced to eat foods they do not want.

Food preferences develop as a child is exposed to new foods in a calm, non-threatening way. When a child sits down to eat, the caregiver needs to step back and allow the child to be in control of what he or she eats. This will help the child to develop healthy eating behaviors.

Caregivers still have control over which foods they offer a child. They should continue to offer a variety of foods from the food guide pyramid. This will allow the child to make food choices from what is offered.

It does not do any harm to offer children their favorite foods, as long as other foods are offered as well to encourage variety. After a while, the child will become bored with the same food and will begin making other choices.

Preschool children can often meet their nutritional needs over several days. They may not get enough of certain nutrients and calories one day, because they are being picky. But they will usually make up for it the next day by eating what they need and more.

For this age group, it is best to offer small meals several times a day to try to increase their food intake. They should have three regular meals as well as healthy snacks between meals.

Healthy snack choices include:

- fresh fruit
- low-fat cheese
- raw vegetables
- whole-grain crackers
- peanut butter sandwich (using whole-grain bread and trans-fat-free peanut butter)

Taste is not the only factor that matters in children's food likes and dislikes. Temperature of food is important too. Most toddlers prefer their food lukewarm. How the food looks and smells is also key.

Children who are active are more likely to be hungry. However, children will not eat well if they are overly tired. Mealtimes and playtimes should be balanced.

Also, if children snack before a meal, they will not eat well at that meal. Children should not be allowed to eat or drink within 1 1/2 hours of a meal.

Here are some other approaches to getting children to try new foods.

- Offer only one new food at a time. Children should be told in advance if the taste is sweet, sour, or salty.
- Give small amounts of the food at first. This gives children a chance to see if they like the new food.
- Tell children they do not have to swallow the food if they do not like it.
- Offer a new food more than once. Many young children try a new food a few times before they finally accept it.
- Be a good role model. If the caregiver asks a child to drink milk or eat vegetables, he or she should be eating those foods too.
- Seat children with siblings or friends who eat a variety of foods. It is more likely that a child will try a new food if other children at the table are eating that food.
- Serve a new food along with one of the child's favorite foods.

Food jags are a normal and temporary part of a child's development. However, if a child refuses whole food groups for more than two weeks, the caregiver should talk with the child's doctor.

<http://health.discovery.com/encyclopedias/illnesses.html?article=1905>