

Healthy Eating Challenges

for Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities



Many children and youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) face challenges that can make it difficult to adopt healthy eating habits. This increases their risk for developing obesity. Learning about these common challenges is an important step in helping them develop healthy behaviors.

Eating Problems

- Selective or “choosy” eating such as resistance or refusal to try unfamiliar foods.
- Sensitivity to texture, color, smell, temperature, or brands of certain foods.
- Unusual or ritualistic eating patterns.
- Preference for foods that are high in calories and low in nutrients.

Oral-Motor Difficulties

- Difficulty chewing and swallowing food can lead to a preference for softer foods which are often highly processed and less nutritious.

Low Muscle Tone

- Children with low Muscle Tone can have trouble staying seated during meals, self-feeding, and using utensils. Poor posture also effects chewing and swallowing.

Caloric Needs

- Children with certain developmental disabilities, such as Down syndrome, may have lower caloric needs. It can be hard to limit caloric intake in environments where unhealthy foods are prevalent.

Food Rewards

- Tend to be high in sugar and calories.
- Often used to reinforce desired behavior in special education and behavior plans.
- Contribute to unhealthy eating habits.

Mealtime Behavior

- Children may have difficult behavior associated with their resistance to trying new foods and other expectations and routines. This can make it challenging to eat together with other children and at home.

Self-Awareness

- Children with I/DD may not understand the health risks of a poor diet and lack of physical activity.

TIP

Let's Go! has resources to help you promote healthy eating habits at [LetsGo.org/tools](https://lets-go.org/tools).