

Understanding ARFID

(Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder)

What Is ARFID?

Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) describes when a child consistently eats only a small range of foods.

Unlike other eating disorders, ARFID is not linked to body image or weight concerns. Instead, it often relates to sensory experiences, fear of negative reactions to food, or a reduced interest in eating.

Every child's experience with ARFID is different. For some, certain textures, smells, or colours may feel overwhelming. Others may have had a frightening experience such as choking or vomiting, which makes eating feel scary. Some simply do not feel hunger in the same way as others.

When Does ARFID Begin?

There is no minimum age for ARFID to appear or be diagnosed. Some children begin showing signs as early as toddlerhood (around ages two to three), when they start exploring a wider range of foods. Others may develop ARFID later, often between six and thirteen years old.

A diagnosis can be made at any age if the eating patterns are affecting your child's health, growth, or wellbeing, and are not related to body image concerns.

If you are concerned about your child's eating, it is always appropriate to seek advice from your GP, health visitor, or paediatrician.

Recognising ARFID

Parents often notice that their child eats a very limited range of foods and resists trying new ones. These patterns can sometimes affect growth, energy, or concentration.

Children may also feel anxious around meals, find it hard to eat with others, or avoid social events involving food.

It is important to remember that these behaviours are not stubbornness or choice. They are often a response to real sensory discomfort or fear.

ARFID and Picky Eating: What Is the Difference?

Most children go through selective eating phases, but ARFID tends to be more intense and long-lasting.

A child with ARFID may experience distress when faced with new foods and might struggle to get enough nutrition or energy. While picky eating often improves naturally, ARFID usually requires understanding, patience, and supportive guidance.

Supporting Your Child at Home

Creating a calm, positive mealtime atmosphere makes a big difference. Try to keep meals low-pressure. It is fine if your child does not try everything on the plate. Offer opportunities to explore new foods through play, smell, or touch, without expecting them to eat straight away.

Celebrate small steps, such as looking at a new food or having it on the plate, and avoid focusing on what has not been eaten. Children are more likely to feel confident about food when they feel safe and in control.

You may also find it helpful to learn more about ARFID together through storybooks, child-friendly videos, or supportive online resources.