

Nutritional Considerations for Autistic Populations

General Overview



There's a lot to feeding children and here at The Professional Nursery Kitchen we take every element of it seriously. We understand that no two children are the same and that each child will have their own food journey ahead of them. We want to show how we understand the importance of the early years' setting in encouraging children to set off in the right direction on that food journey and that there may be times when a little extra support goes a long way.

When it comes to understanding the role of nutrition within Autistic populations, we are on hand to offer some practical advice and guidance, we appreciate that any issues with food can be sensitive and sometimes complicated to manage but we want every child to be able to enjoy food, whatever their individual preferences may be. **We also want to ensure that where there are any specific 'preferences' or 'limitations' to a child's diet that they do not go without the essential nutrients they need and that they still have an enjoyable relationship with the foods they eat.**

There are some practical steps that can be undertaken when helping children embrace a healthy relationship with food but first let's look at some of the frequently identified food concerns that some children may experience: -

GI disorders

First and foremost, many eating issues experienced by children on the Autism spectrum may be as a result of a gastrointestinal disorder. These may hinder the enjoyment of foods, the ability to sit at a table for any length of time or cause anxiety around foods.

Food Routines and expectations

Most children thrive on routines but for children within Autistic populations routines can be especially important and any change to the routine can be upsetting, even distressing.



Having a menu visible for the week is helpful as the child (and parents) know what to expect, try to minimise any changes to this especially any last-minute changes! If you have a special event or a theme meal planned

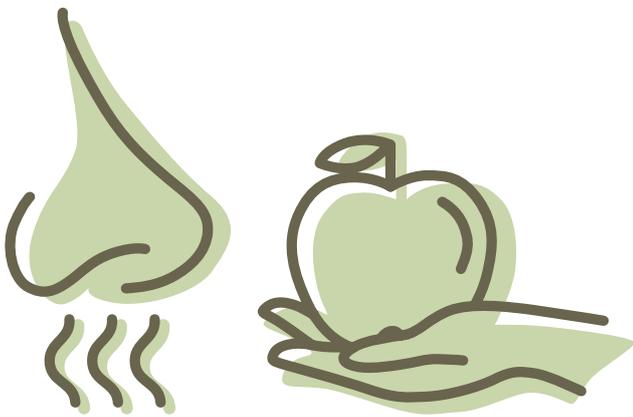
please try to plan this in advance rather than springing a surprise on the children! Some may love a surprise but in others, it could cause some anxiety and upset. Fear and anxiety will 'shut down hunger' so ensuring transition to meal times is fun and relaxed will help children feel at ease.

New tastes

Introducing new foods can be challenging but it is important to keep trying - offer a food that remains familiar looking while building tolerance to small and incremental changes and remember a lot of praise goes a long way with food acceptance!

Sensory issues

We are sure you are all too aware that many children have some sensory issues around food! Some may not like foods to touch, may not like foods that look/smell or feel a certain way or not want a sauce to blend into any other food on their plate. It is difficult striking a balance



between a child who is being selective over a child who feels genuine distress over their food sensory issues. Some practical steps for a child could be to let them guide on how their food is presented or to ensure that they have the cup/plate/place setting they are used to and comfortable with.

Taste expectations

Some children within Autistic populations may have extreme taste sensations, for some this may mean very bland foods yet for others they may be over-zealous with seasoning and desire overly spiced or salty foods. It's great when children embrace spicy foods but we need to be careful they are not causing any digestive disturbances and monitor this carefully. Our menu is designed to have a range of more

dynamic menu items that would suit a more complex palate (and an enquiring one!) without any adverse digestive issues.

Behaviour around food

Many children with autism may also have postural issues that interfere with eating. Low muscle tone, for example, can make it difficult to maintain an upright seated position so if a child is particularly fidgety at the table or seems to experience discomfort, this may be the reason why.

Things best avoided!

Things like to work in partnerships and in harmony in the body. If we stick to the right food, we will get the right nutrients to do the right jobs; supporting immunity, a healthy gut microbiome, manufacturing neurotransmitters to balance mood, sleep and behaviour. We will metabolise food and fuel and eliminate waste etc. When we eat the wrong food, this can all fall out of synch. There are certain foods which are worse culprits than others;

- Artificial ingredients including sweeteners, trans-fats and too much sugar
- E numbers particularly the 'Southampton Six'; E110, E104, E122, E129, E102, E124

The menu here at TPNK is free from ingredients that would cause a negative biological reaction and full of foods that support optimal formative nutrition.

Blood Sugar Regulation

For any child managing a stable blood sugar level is beneficial for mood and behaviour. Dips can cause increase levels of the stress hormone cortisol, increasing feelings of fear/anxiousness. Our menu at TPNK is designed to ensure that all children get a stable and sustained release of energy with each meal and snack provided.

Nutrients & Essential Fatty Acids (EFA's)

Many children can easily become deficient in EFA's. There's lots of evidence around how EFA's impact on overall health but can have a huge influence on neurological health. For some time, Omega 3 supplementation and Omega 3 diets have been used in studies to assess depression, anxiety and behavioural issues. If we consider that a deficiency in EFA's would worsen stress and anxiety it's very important that children with Autism get their intake either via foods or often via supplementation if the diet is too limited. We are working on our menu at TPNK to further enhance the range of Essential Fatty Acids available as menu options.



TPNK Help Sheets available on

- **GI Disorders**
- **Food Routines & Sensory Issues**
- **Introducing New Tastes & Taste expectations**
- **Blood Sugar Regulation**



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