



Aswini Sagar

Picky or selective eating among teenagers is caused by a variety of factors. Nutritionists argue that it starts much earlier but gets overlooked. CE takes a deeper look into food preferences among children and how to guide them into healthy eating habits

REGULATING PICKY EATING



SHRIMANSI KAUSHIK

RAVI, 11 years old, comes back from school, flings his school bag in one corner of the room and switches on the TV. While cartoons flash on the TV screen, his mother forces him to change out of his school uniform and keeps his lunch on the side table. Glued to the screen, Ravi takes a glance at the food served to him. Pushing his plate away, he runs towards the fridge, takes out an ice cream bucket and begins to eat a spoonful of it. His mother notices this and runs after him to finish his food.

This has been Ravi's post-school regimen for a few years now. His mother chasing him to finish his lunch is a regular sight. His tantrums have increased as he heads into a pre-teenage phase.

Children and teenagers develop selective eating based on a variety of factors. With bodies changing at the onset of puberty, hormonal changes bring mood swings with them and it is a common perception

that even food choices are a result of that. However, nutritionists believe that selective eating starts much earlier than that. It is only visible in teenagers as they are able to express their likes and dislikes.

Aswini Sagar, A Clinical & Sports Nutritionist who runs Ahaarveda says, "Picky eating actually starts from when children are toddlers. When infants are fed with breast milk or bottle-fed after one year of age, they get used to comfort feeding. In this stage, they use their tongue and cheeks to swallow food and do not chew their food. When this transition from swallowing to chewing is happening, the weaning has to happen in a healthy way. We need to make sure that the child is well-breast fed till one year of age after which bottle feeding is not encouraged."

A number of factors lead to picky eating among teenagers. "Food sensitivities, food textures or memories associated with the food, food habits, the environment or even developmental adaptations-- all together have an impact on

why a teenager is actually showing these habits. After they hit puberty, we realise something is not right because their body is going for a roller-coaster ride of hormones and enzymes. They look forward to something quick and that suits their mood all the time," said Aswini Sagar.

Nutritionists argue that using screen time for feeding children is not a good idea for developing good food habits. "Toddlers usually eat their food while watching a phone/tablet screen. They do not realise the texture of the food at times when they are focusing on the screen. Mothers would mash the food and feed with a spoon and the child is on the screen time. Food acceptance is not happening because the focus is somewhere else. The child is just gulping down the food. Since this is a stage when they are not eating consciously, when the stage of conscious eating comes, they do not accept the real textures," said Sagar.

She further added that parental behaviours set examples for their children. When parents do not discipline

themselves, children fall into the same patterns and then parents try to force-feed or blackmail the child into eating healthy food. "Forcing the child or driving them to something like an ice cream or chocolate does not allow them to build healthy relationships with food. A lot of mothers get blamed for children being picky. They might be paying a lot of attention but not being smart with the child. They actually have to observe what's going on within them. So a major role is with the caretakers or guardians in shaping children's food acceptance and choices," Sagar added.

According to Dr Asma Sajid, Senior Dietitian & Nutritionist, Fernandez Hospital, food advertising also creates an impact on teenagers. "Children and teens think food promoted by their favourite celebrities is healthier. Secondly, the portion of the food also matters. The size of a burger or a pizza slice 10 years back was different but now you have a king-size burger and an 8-12 inches pizza slice. If a child is having that with coke, why would he go back and eat parantha and

sabzi?" she said.

She adds that neophobia, that is, fear of trying new foods can also be a reason. "Once they are habituated to one type of food, they might be afraid of trying something new. Moreover, being teenagers, they sometimes even go overboard or eat less based on the body they are trying to get into," she added. "They think they have to lose weight and restrict themselves from eating some food items. They end up with many micronutrient deficiencies," she further added.

Moreover, picky eating can also lead to some eating disorders or it might be a symptom of it. It is also associated with their emotional needs. A lot of sugar intake and preference for salty or tangy flavours depends on emotional and security needs. Hence, nutritionists suggest caretakers be attentive and understanding of what children are going through.

Nutritionists suggest some ways in which picky eating can be managed. Firstly, avoid resorting to tactics like manipulation or coercion. Pa-

tience is key, as change takes time. Secondly, educate rather than dictate or force. Gently convey that nutrition plays a role, without scolding. Highlight the benefits of a balanced diet, rich in antioxidants and fibre. Thirdly, reduce excessive rewards and dopamine-driven behaviour. Engage in discussions, but limit constant rewards for every action. Offer healthy food choices tailored to the child's preferences. Involve them in meal planning and preparation, encouraging creativity. Adolescents can be engaged constructively without tantrums. Lifestyle education is crucial during this formative phase. Discuss discipline's role in health, while being mindful not to overwhelm. Monitor sleep, physical activity, and bowel habits, all of which influence food choices. For children with extreme behaviour and eating disorders, seek professional help from paediatricians, nutritionists, or psychologists. Emotional security is vital during transitions. Lastly, remember that discipline and patience are lifelong commitments.

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Dr Asma Sajid