

# The Health Impact of Extreme Picky Eating

## Before Getting Started...

Take a few minutes to discuss the following questions with your nutritionist:

- How do you think picky eating could impact your health?
- When you hear the word “malnutrition,” what do you think of?
- How do our bodies respond when we don’t eat enough calories or nutrients?

## Why Can Picky Eating Become a Problem?

Most teens enjoy a variety of foods from each food group: grains, protein, dairy, fruit, vegetables, and fats. Each food group contains different nutrients, which play important roles in the body. Here are a few examples:

**GRAINS** give us carbohydrates for quick and long-term energy and prevent moods swings.

**DAIRY** has calcium and vitamin D, which are necessary for bones, hormones, and growth.

**PROTEIN** repair muscles, organs, and tissues and increase fullness at meals.

**FATS/OILS** keep our brains healthy and help us absorb vitamins A, D, E and K.

**FRUIT** gives us Vitamin C to heal wounds and fiber to prevent constipation.

**VEGETABLES** have Vitamin A to keep skin healthy and Vitamin C to help absorb iron.

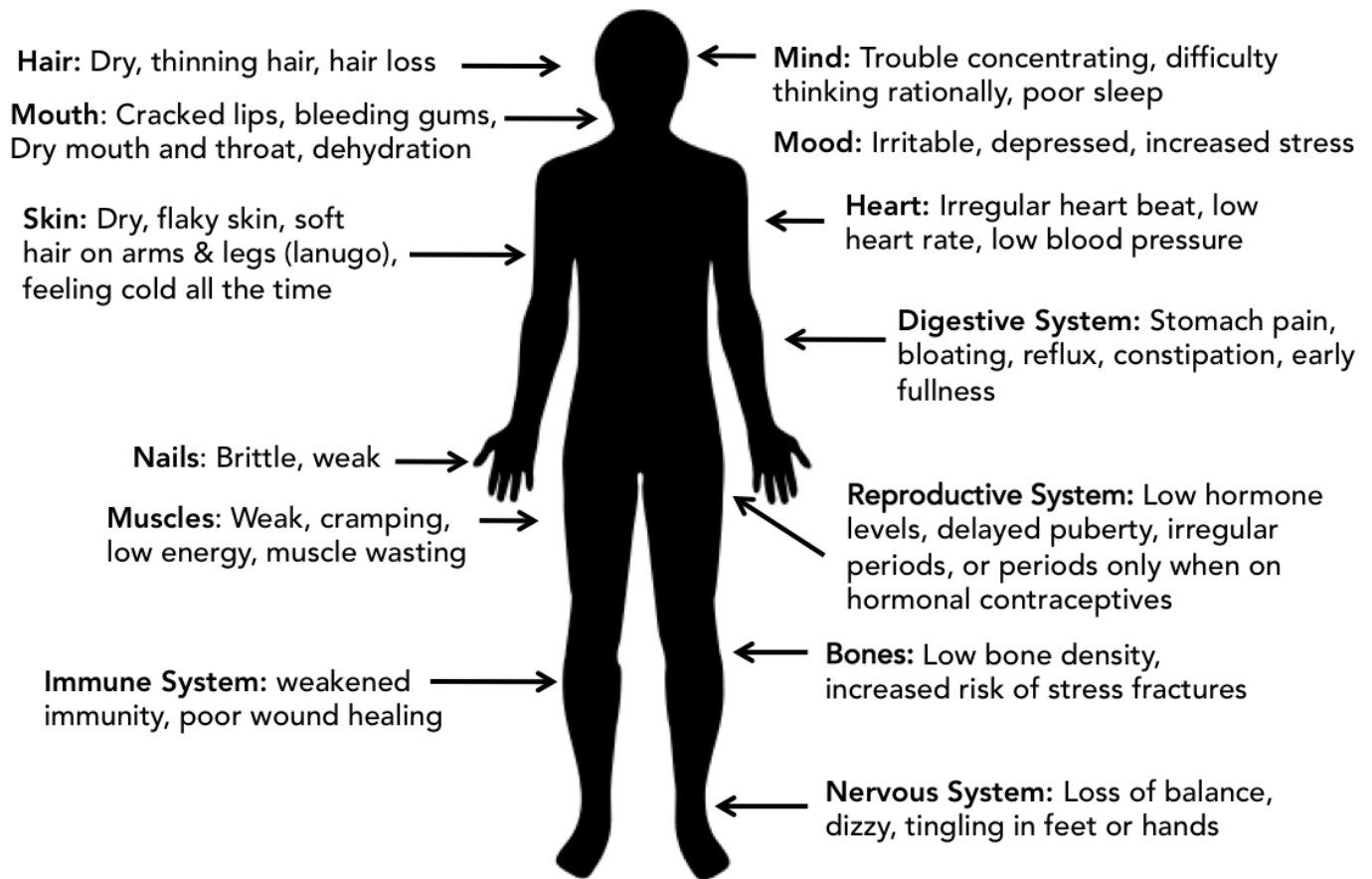


Other teens may be more sensitive eaters (often called “picky” eaters). Teens may experience picky eating because of low appetite or interest in food, specific food preferences based on taste, smell, texture, or another food characteristic, or a negative memory of a past eating experience. Picky eating can become a problem when teens start avoiding entire food groups or eating only a small list of foods.

## How Do I Know If My Picky Eating Is Impacting My Health?

Picky eating becomes concerning when a teen is not getting enough energy from food and drinks or not getting enough of a specific nutrient like protein, carbohydrates, fat, vitamins or minerals. This is called malnutrition. Without enough energy or nutrients like calcium or iron, extreme picky eating can interfere with growth, development, energy levels, and day-to-day activities like sports and school.

## Common Signs of Malnutrition



### Questions For You:

- Which of these symptoms have you experienced?
- Why do you think they could be signs of malnutrition?

### What's the Difference Between Picky Eating and an Eating Disorder?

There are many types of eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and binge eating disorder. Generally speaking, an eating disorder can cause someone to have extreme emotions, attitudes, and behaviors around food, exercise, and/or body image.

Avoidant-Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (also known as ARFID) is one type of eating disorder that many people are less familiar with. For teens with ARFID, picky eating may have started when they were young and progressed as they became older to the point that they are not able to meet their energy and nutrient needs for growth or function well on a day-to-day basis because of their limited food preferences or eating habits.



This list includes some of the common signs and symptoms of ARFID, although someone with ARFID may not have all of the signs and symptoms listed below.

## Signs and Symptoms of ARFID:

(Adapted from the National Eating Disorder Association)

- Difficulty maintaining a weight appropriate for age, height, and body frame
- A nutritional deficiency such as iron deficiency anemia
- Avoidance of certain foods or entire food groups
- Eating a small number of foods or only foods with a specific color, taste, smell, texture, or other food preference (ex. specific food brand or preparation method)
- Decreased portion sizes of foods
- Very slow eating
- Fear of vomiting, nausea, choking or pain with swallowing
- Difficulty digesting food (ex. constipation, acid reflux, feeling full quickly, etc.)
- Isolating self from friends and activities, becoming withdrawn and less social
- Difficulty eating meals with family or friends
- Inflexible thinking, anxiety around food and eating, difficulty expressing emotions
- Co-occurring mental health concern or developmental delay such as anxiety, ADHD, intellectual disabilities, or autism spectrum disorder
- No body image concerns or fear of gaining weight
- Low appetite or interest in food that's not due to other medical or mental health conditions (ex. food poisoning, flu, or depression)

\*If someone is avoiding certain foods due to a cultural or religious practice, this is not a symptom of ARFID. For example, fasting during Ramadan.

In contrast to ARFID, normal and healthy eating is on the other end of the spectrum. While this can look different for everyone, some principles of normal, healthy eating are outlined below:

## Principles of Normal, Healthy Eating:

- Eating when you're hungry and stopping when you're full and satisfied
- Being flexible with eating depending on your schedule and social events
- Enjoying a variety of foods that are nutritious and energizing to meet your body's needs
- Spending some time thinking about food but not being so rigid about food that it gets in the way of your interests and relationships with friends and family

Picky eating is the gray area between healthy eating and ARFID, where someone may identify with many symptoms of ARFID but not completely. Since picky eating can increase someone's risk of developing ARFID, teens who suspect they may have picky eating should share this with their health care provider or a dietitian.



## How Do You Treat ARFID?

Guidance on eating to meet energy and nutrient needs to support health and growth.

Comprehensive care with support from a medical, mental health, and nutrition specialists.

Gradual introduction to new or challenging foods.

Ongoing support from friends and family for a positive eating environment.

In addition to medical, mental health, and nutrition support for ARFID treatment, other important team members may include a feeding therapist to address specific sensory food concerns or an occupational therapist to overcome barriers to eating new foods.

The sooner you start working with a comprehensive care team to address your eating disorder behaviors, the easier it is to treat and fully recover.

## What Does This Mean For Me?

1. Where do you think you fall on the spectrum of eating behaviors?
2. What are some ways you would be comfortable making changes to your eating?

## To Learn More:

National Eating Disorders Association: [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)

Center For Young Women's Health: [youngwomenshealth.org/nutrition-fitness-index/](http://youngwomenshealth.org/nutrition-fitness-index/)

Center For Young Men's Health: [youngmenshealthsite.org/nutrition-fitness-index/](http://youngmenshealthsite.org/nutrition-fitness-index/)

Rowell K, McGlothlin J. *Helping Your Child Through Extreme Picky Eating* (2015).

## References:

"Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID)." *National Eating Disorders Association*, 2018, <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/by-eating-disorder/arfid>.

Whitney, Eleanor Noss, and Sharon Rady Rolfes. *Understanding nutrition*. Cengage Learning, 2016.