



The Gustatory (Taste) System

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Our Gustatory system or sense of taste allows us to taste the food we eat.

Although the Gustatory (sense of taste) system is a separate system, it works closely with the Olfactory system to enable us to taste and recognise flavours. The Tactile system also plays a part, in enabling us to discriminate between different textures of food and helps us to move food around in our mouths in order to chew and swallow.

As well as using our mouths to eat with, as babies we use our mouths to start making sense of the world around us by mouthing things, including our hands, feet, toys and other objects.

A child may be a picky eater because they do not like the flavour/taste of something. Certain flavours may be too strong for them or they may enjoy stronger flavours such as garlic, curries, sweet, sour. Texture of food also plays a big part when it comes to food preferences. A child may not like certain foods due to [Oral Hypersensitivity](#).

Behaviours of kids who are hypersensitive to oral stimulation may include:

- Doesn't like certain food textures in the mouth.
- Avoids any new foods with new colours, textures, or tastes.
- Avoids foods with mixed textures. For example, smooth foods with lumps, e.g. spaghetti sauce with meat, stews with meat and vegetable chunks.
- Has a very limited diet due to avoiding various other things.
- May have a strong preference for temperature of food or drink, and be sensitive to any variations.
- Preferring to eat different foods on the plate separately, e.g. eating all the meat first, then all the potatoes, then all the peas.
- Refusing any contact with their mouth, for feeding, tooth brushing or play.
- Preferring to only eat one food at a time, and have troubles eating more than one texture at a time
- Gagging all the time on foods, or on eating utensils
- Extreme distress during feeding time, such the child may, push food away
- Refusing to chew food, or drooling all the time
- A need to control the mealtime experience, and may want only certain food textures, certain spoons, certain plates, and certain cups.

What Causes Oral Hypersensitivity?

There are various children in whom this can be seen:

- Children who have had a history of uncomfortable medical procedures around their faces (such as tubes down their throats) may be overly sensitive because of the memory of those experiences.
- Children who have been fed through stomach tubes may be overly sensitive because of lack of experience using their mouths.
- For many others, the cause is unknown.





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Strategies for a Child that presents with Oral Sensitivities:

- If the child's nutrition is compromised, discuss with your doctor. A referral to a Dietician may be required.
- Encourage the child to use "mouth fidgets" such as gum, chewing on straws etc.
- Encourage the child to take part in oral-motor games such as blowing bubbles, using whistles.
- When introducing new foods/textures, do a gradual or stepwise approach
- For example, if the child likes apple juice, and you are trying to introduce orange juice, then do something like this:
 - Day 1: Give the child 100% apple juice
 - Day 2: Give the child 75% apple juice, and 25% orange juice
 - Day 3: Give the child 50% apple juice, and 50% orange juice
 - Day 4: Give the child 25 % apple juice, and 75% orange juice
 - Day 5: Give the child 100% orange juice

The above example is only a guideline, so feel free to vary, or adjust as needed.

Specific strategies for picky eaters who have Oral Hypersensitivity:

Before eating:

- For a child who really is overwhelmed and cannot even eat, allow the child to get used to oral stimulation by allowing the child to explore his/her favourite toys orally. Dip them into flavoured water, pureed foods, etc.
- Allow the child to play with his/her food. If they throw the food, instead have them kiss it or bite it goodbye into an "all done bowl." Always offer the food you are eating for them to explore. Talk about it with them, e.g. "It's soft, hot, green, etc."
- Consider calming background music during meals.
- Ensure your child has good sitting posture – ensure that the child is sitting up properly.
- Because many oral hypersensitive children may also have touch hypersensitivities, they may benefit from soothing deep pressure or firm touch, particularly if they are given advance notice about being touched. Avoid unexpected touch, or light ticklish touch. Let your child know in advance you are going to touch, and approach within the child's field of vision, so that the child can be prepared.

- Consider making a picture book that shows oral exercises of "How to warm up your mouth before eating" that you can show the child before eating.

During eating:

- So that the child doesn't feel overwhelmed, do not present all foods at once, but rather present them one at a time.
- When your child gestures or says that they are all done with that food, clear all of it away from the table, hands and mouth with a wash cloth before going onto the next food.
- Pay attention to food temperature – in general, room-temperature foods are easier.
- Pay attention to food textures – when switching or changing foods, change gradually.
- Consider mixing one food gradually with the other until you have transitioned from the starting food, to the target food.

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After eating:

- Give lots of praise for whatever success s/he had (“Awesome! Good job on eating!”)
- Even if your child did not eat very much, praise him/her for trying (“I appreciate that you tried!”)



There are various products for children with oral motor problems, or oral hypersensitivity, and they can be found by doing an internet search for ‘products’ and ‘oral motor problems’ or ‘oral hypersensitivity’.

You may also find it helpful to read our hand-out called ‘Fussy Eaters’ which can be found on our website www.acecic.co.uk – Children Services: Paediatric Therapies: Occupational Therapy – Self Care Skills.

Information taken from: Information for families (Michael Cheng and Jennifer Boggett-Carsjens 2011)