

South Warwickshire



NHS Foundation Trust

Warwickshire Dietetic Service

**Ideas to Prevent Overeating and
Weight Gain in Individuals with Autistic
Spectrum Disorder**

Ideas to Prevent Overeating and Weight Gain in Individuals with Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Overeating and lack of exercise can lead to rapid weight gain. Being overweight puts us at higher risk of developing diseases such as heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes as well as increasing the risk of dental decay and gum disease, some types of cancer and mobility problems.

Why may people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder overeat?

The hypothalamus part of the brain which tells us when we are full may not be functioning properly.

They may have become obsessed with certain aspects of food leading to overeating.

Eating may help them with stress or low self esteem.

They may have a sensory dysfunction causing a craving for specific foods.

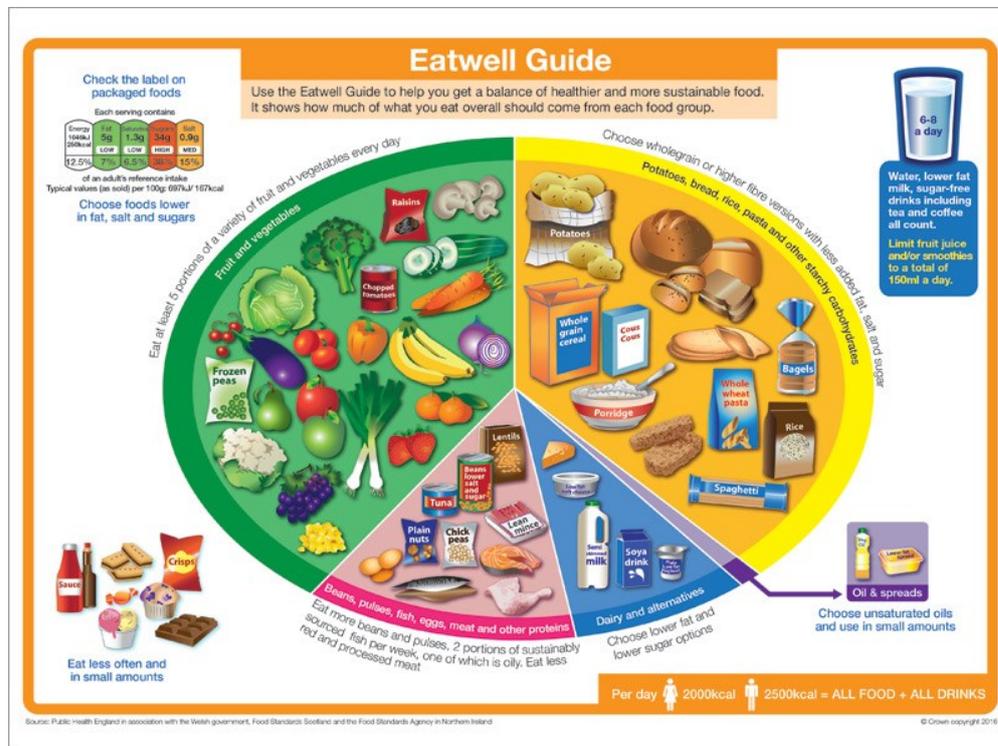
Some people are on medication which can cause an increase in appetite e.g. anti-psychotics, anti-depressants.

Many people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder also limit their diet to specific foods which may put them at risk of vitamin and mineral deficiencies e.g. anaemia and osteoporosis, even though they are overweight.

To prevent excessive weight gain and prevent deficiencies, the individual needs to eat a balanced diet and take part in regular exercise.

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'The Eatwell Guide' shows the types and proportions of food required for an enjoyable, well balanced diet.



Individuals with Autistic Spectrum Disorder often have additional problems in understanding and processing information related to food and healthy eating. A number of possible strategies may help.

Create a food diary

Recording an individual's eating habits for a few weeks will provide you with useful information about their eating patterns and possible reasons for overeating. Try and include the following information in the food diary:

- What time of day did they eat?
- Where did they eat?
- What did they eat?
- How much did they eat?
- Who was there?
- Were there any environmental factors, e.g. radio, TV, noise?
- Do they prefer foods of certain colours, textures, smells, tastes or shapes?

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Check their diet is varied enough?

Use the food groups in the 'Eatwell Guide' to check if their diet is balanced. Although the individual is overeating, they may still be avoiding certain groups of food.

Create a Structured Eating Routine

Serve 3 meals per day at similar times each day. Avoid 'grazing'. Make sure the individual knows what the routine is. If snacks are required, these should also be offered at set times.

Use visual supports, e.g.

- Visual clear daily or weekly menus of food.

- Show times of eating on their activity timetable.

- Visual schedules that break down activities into steps, e.g. tasting a new food.

- Choice boards – picture symbols to allow food choice and encourage desirable foods.

- Social stories – teachers or speech and language therapists may be able to construct an individual social story with a favourite character.

- Scrapbook – write or stick in pictures or packets of foods which they like, as well as healthy foods which you are trying to encourage.

Volume of food

Reduce the volume of food and drink by using a smaller plate or glass.

Exercise

Encourage regular exercise of 30—60 minutes daily. This is anything which gets the person warm and slightly out of breath. It can include formal exercise, e.g. walking, swimming, gym or everyday activities such as gardening.

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Tips to help you manage constant demands for food



Use visuals to remind individuals of out of bounds areas such as no entry signs on cupboards and fridges.

- Keep foods out of sight and out of reach wherever possible.
- Try a food chart, scrapbook or traffic light system which restricts unhealthy foods to one treat per day.
- Show the empty saucepan and confirm verbally “all gone”.
- Consistent messages on healthy eating from everyone to avoid confusion and anxiety.

If an adult with autistic spectrum disorder also has a learning disability and their behaviour becomes extreme, you may have to consider if it is in their best interest to lock cupboards and fridges.

Burglar alarm sensors or discreet secure magnetic locks can be used. This is particularly important if the individual is helping themselves to raw food or waste which could cause severe illness. You may need to discuss this with the multidisciplinary team in the case of adults who do not have capacity in this area and use the Mental Capacity Act and Deprivation of Liberty Legislation to make decisions in their 'best interest'.

Useful web sites include:

www.dlf.org.uk www.nichelocks.com

Useful web sites for portion controlled recipes include:

www.cwt.org.uk www.cwt-chew.org.uk

Further help

Ask to be referred to the Changemakers Programme (4-11 years) or Fitter Futures Service (adolescents & adults) if suitable.

Further information:

www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

PALS

We offer a Patient Advice Liaison Service (PALS). This is a confidential service for patients and their families to help with any questions or concerns about local health services.

You can contact the service by direct telephone line on 01926 600054 or using the phone links which are available in both hospitals or calling in at the office located in the main entrance at Warwick Hospital.

Our information for patients can also be made available in other languages, Braille, audio tape, disc or in large print – please contact our PALS office.

As a key provider of healthcare and as an employer, the Trust has a statutory obligation to promote and respect equality and human rights. This is set out in various pieces of legislation including: Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, Disability Discrimination Act (2005), Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and Age Discrimination Act (2006)

**If you have any queries about your diet, please contact us on 01926 600818
Selecting option 3.**

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