

# ENHANCING MEALTIMES

A CAREGIVERS GUIDE TO EATING HABITS OF ADULTS WITH  
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER



## ***Food Sensory & ASD***

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Every individual has food preferences. Whether it be chocolate ice cream over vanilla, pancakes over waffles, bagels instead of toast, we all prefer certain items and that ultimately dictates how we expect our dining experience to go.

The preferred food items is a choice we make subconsciously because our minds tell us that the “better” choice will satisfy our needs. This experience is the same whether an individual is neurotypical or neurodivergent.

However, neurodivergent people, especially individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), lean into their preferences at a much greater capacity. Individuals with ASD can experience both hyper and hyposensitivity to a variety of stimuli. In terms of nutrition and food intake, often times these states of sensitivity can result in sensory aversion - getting away from the stimuli - or sensory seeking - encouraging additional sensory input. Either sensory experience is not negative in itself, but; depending on their severity, these avoidance or preferable behaviors have the ability to negatively affect overall health should they limit food intake to the point of nutritional deficiencies.

The following article highlights some helpful ways caregivers can honor one's food sensitivities while ensuring a nutritionally adequate diet.

## ***The Caregivers Role***

As caregivers to the ASD community, understanding the basis of the client's eating habits sets the foundation for a greater quality of care. The following offers insight, tips, and tricks to enhance caregiver and client mealtimes.

### ***Where to Start?***

Simply asking and opening a conversation is the best way to understand a client's needs. Ask them questions such as, "What does a typical meal look like for you?", "What types of foods do you regularly eat?" As the caregiver, do you see any patterns in their responses?

For example, say a client only eats dry cereal and grapes for breakfast. That individual may prefer hard crunchy textures over a specific flavor. So, incorporating more foods to balance the meals will need to match that textural preference. Or, say a client prefers to eat chicken salad with crackers for lunch. This client may prefer simply flavored foods over highly spiced dishes.

## ***Modify & Substitute***

Adapting foods to meet sensory needs will result in a greater expansion of the overall diet quality. Avoiding certain foods will only limit intake and promote a poor quality diet. Look for food preparation methods and food item variations that better match the sensory needs.

### ***Sample Swaps for Texture Preferences***

- Banana chips over soft bananas
- Roast broccoli versus steamed
- Toast sandwich breads
- Serve cereal dry with milk on the side
- Freeze fresh berries

## ***Encourage Communication***

When working with people with ASD, food preferences may change and safe textures/flavors won't be well accepted on certain days. Caregivers, must ebb and flow through client's needs with an open channel of communication. Frustration is inevitable when an effective tool suddenly stops working, but this frustration is not one-sided. The goal is never perfection, but continuously finding the best way to enjoy a healthy diet and lifestyle.