

Persistent picky eating predicts pervasive developmental disorders in children

Picky eating — characterized by food refusal, unwillingness to try new foods or eating a limited variety of foods — affects 14-50% preschool children and is often considered by clinicians as a normal phase of child development. However, whether persistent or late-onset picky eating has adverse consequences on mental health is unknown. Researchers in the Netherlands have started to address this concept by analysing eating habits in >3,500 children from a population-based cohort. The children were assessed for picky eating at ages 1.5, 3 and 6 years by maternal report and for problem behaviours at age 7 years using the Teacher's Report Form. The majority of children (51.4%) were not picky eaters, 31.9% were remitting picky eaters and 5.5% were persistent picky eaters. Data analysis found that persistent picky eating could predict pervasive developmental disorders at age 7 years, but was not associated with behavioural (attention hyperactivity and oppositional defiant problems) or emotional problems (anxiety and affective problems). Remitting and late-onset picky eating were not associated with adverse mental health outcomes. The researchers consider that remitting picky eating should be considered a normal phase of development in preschool children but that persistent picky eating may be an early indicator of pervasive developmental problems.

Cardona Cano, S., Hoek, H.W., van Hoeken, D., de Barse, L.M., Jaddoe, V.W.V., Verhulst, F.C. & Tiemeier, H. (2016), Behavioural outcomes of picking eating in childhood: a prospective study in the general population. J Child Psychol Psychiatr. 57: 1239-1246. doi:10.1111/jcpp.12530

Glossary:

Pervasive developmental disorders: a group of five disorders characterized by delays in social and communicative development. The disorders include autism spectrum disorders and Rett syndrome.

