



Understanding ARFID in Autism: Assessment, Overlap and Intervention

Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) is characterised by restricted or avoidant eating that leads to nutritional, physical, or psychosocial difficulties, and is not primarily driven by concerns about weight or shape.

Clinically, ARFID often involves:

Sensory-based avoidance (e.g. texture, taste)

Fear of aversive consequences (e.g. choking, vomiting)

Low interest in eating

Individuals may present with one or multiple overlapping profiles

Why This Matters

Severe food restriction is frequently reported

Sensory sensitivities are a key driver

Diets may be highly limited in variety

Eating difficulties in autistic young people are common and can be clinically significant; some reflect ARFID, highlighting the importance of accurate identification.

The Overlap: Autism & ARFID

Research shows high rates of co-occurrence between autism and ARFID, and in autistic young people ARFID often emerges from shared underlying features:

Sensory sensitivities to food

Strong preferences and restricted repertoires

Anxiety around eating or aversive consequences

Rigid patterns and routines



The Clinical Challenge

Assessment is often difficult in autistic young people:

Under-recognition of risk

Nutritional difficulties may be missed when weight appears stable

Diagnostic ambiguity

Distinguishing ARFID from autism-related eating patterns

Complex presentations

Complex presentations
Multiple drivers (sensory, anxiety, rigidity) interacting

High variability

Different profiles across development and individuals

What Effective Practice Requires

Structured assessment:

Understanding drivers, risk, and co-occurring conditions

Differential diagnosis:

Distinguishing ARFID from autism-related eating differences

Multidisciplinary approach:

Integration of mental health, medical, and dietetic expertise

Adapted interventions:

Neuro-affirmative, flexible, and individualised strategies

Focus on function and risk:

Looking beyond weight to nutritional adequacy and wellbeing

*Explore this topic further in our upcoming event:
["ARFID in Autistic Young People: Assessment, Overlap and Practical Clinical Management"](#)*