

GUIDELINES FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

SCREENING CHILDREN FOR FEEDING DIFFICULTIES

IDENTIFYING FEEDING DIFFICULTIES

A **mealtime screening** is a brief assessment that allows you to identify children most at risk for feeding difficulties.

Screening provides a snapshot of information to make general mealtime recommendations and to determine if a child may require more comprehensive assessment. When indicated, further assessment that is systematic and comprehensive will allow you to make decisions on interventions and referrals. Screening is important because identifying feeding difficulties early paves the way for managing challenges for children in need and better supports the development of safe and efficient feeding skills, which contribute to healthy growth and development.

Feeding difficulties are a wide range of delays or problems with eating and drinking skills including challenges with the development of skills, placement of food in the mouth, maintaining a safe position for mealtime, chewing or manipulating food in the mouth, disruptive or inappropriate mealtime behaviors and safely swallowing.

WHO IS AT RISK FOR FEEDING DIFFICULTIES?

Feeding is a complex sensory and motor task. There are many reasons that any infant or child may have feeding difficulties, such as limited opportunities to practice feeding skills, poor nutrition, a lack of responsive feeding, or interruptions in typical development. Some groups of children may be at a higher risk for experiencing feeding difficulties.

- **Children with developmental disabilities**—certain disabilities can interfere with a child's ability to feed safely and efficiently and may limit the types and amounts of foods they are able to consume.
- **Infants born prematurely**—they commonly have reduced nutrient stores, immature digestive systems, feeding difficulties, and medical complications.
- **Children with complex medical conditions** (e.g., heart disease, pulmonary disease)—some conditions can limit or interfere with a child's feeding and swallowing function. This can result in reduced ability to feed safely, reduced food intake, increased nutrient losses, and increased demand for energy and nutrients.
- **Children with structural abnormalities** (e.g., cleft lip and/or palate and other craniofacial abnormalities)—these abnormalities can affect feeding and swallowing function.

WHO CAN COMPLETE A MEALTIME SCREENING?

Service providers with training and experience in typical development and feeding skills can screen for feeding difficulties by evaluating key components of mealtime compared to what is appropriate for a child's age and stage of development along with any concerns for safety.

TEAM APPROACH

Severity and complexity of feeding difficulties can vary widely for infants and young children. A team approach allows for proper identification and management of feeding difficulties, especially for children with more complex challenges.

You can help healthcare providers that do not directly address feeding difficulties to understand the importance of screening and when to refer to a member of the team. Research has shown that respiratory problems, mealtime duration, weight loss, recurrent vomiting or retching, and mealtime stress can all indicate feeding difficulties. When parents or caregivers report these to their healthcare provider, a referral for a screening is indicated.

The team may include:

- speech therapists
- physicians
- family or caregivers
- nutritionists
- nurses
- occupational therapists
- other medical and rehabilitation specialists

MEALTIME SCREENINGS LOOK AT KEY COMPONENTS OF MEALTIME

Level of Assistance	Tools	Textures	Amount	Duration
How much help the child needs to eat or drink	What is used to eat or drink	The consistency of the foods provided	How much a child eats or drinks	How long it takes a child to complete a meal

HELPING OTHER HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS KNOW WHEN TO REFER

These questions can help healthcare providers assess if a child has feeding difficulties. Ask caregivers these questions to determine whether to refer a child for further assessment.

- Are there signs of airway or respiratory problems?
- How long does it take to feed your child?
- Has your child lost weight or failed to gain weight?
- Does your child retch or vomit often?
- Are mealtimes stressful for the child and/or parent?

Questions adapted from Arvedson, J. (2017, October 27). *Evaluation Feeding and Swallowing Disorders in Infants and Children*. Lecture.



We offer a remote training package on feeding and nutrition for vulnerable children.

Learn more at spoonfoundation.org/training.