

ORAL-MOTOR AND SENSORY PROBLEMS

If you notice that a child shows signs of an oral-motor or sensory problem, share those concerns with the family and suggest they consult a health care provider. Their provider can make a referral for speech and language, occupational, sensory, or behavioral assessments so an appropriate treatment plan can be developed.

Some children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) have oral-motor problems and/or sensory problems that make it more challenging to eat a healthy diet. Below is some information on each type of problem and ways to identify them.

Oral-Motor Problems¹

Oral-motor problems can affect a child's ability to chew and swallow food. As a result, the child may prefer softer foods. Soft foods include healthy choices like steamed or canned vegetables as well as unhealthy choices like French fries or ice-cream. It is important to ensure that children with oral-motor problems eat foods that are both healthy *and* match their preferences.

What are signs of oral-motor problems?

- Low muscle tone around the mouth
- Abnormal oral-motor patterns such as an unusual bite, getting food stuck in the mouth, or difficulty coordinating mouth muscles
- Avoids eating raw or other hard-to-chew foods
- Chokes or gags when trying to swallow
- Sensitive to touch and temperature around the mouth
- Oral facial defects, such as a cleft palate

Sensory Problems²

Sensory problems involve increased or decreased sensitivity to the texture, color, smell, and temperature of certain foods. These problems can impact the types and amount of food a child eats. Identifying that a child has a sensory problem can help families and caregivers determine how to ensure they eat a healthy diet.

What are signs of sensory problems?

INCREASED SENSITIVITY:

- Strongly dislikes certain tastes and smells
- Strongly prefers certain tastes and smells
- Accepts only foods with specific textures or temperatures
- Often smells non-food items

DECREASED SENSITIVITY:

- Avoids chewing their food
- Over-stuffs their mouth
- Craves intense flavors