



ARFID Resource Booklet
For parents, carers and professionals

Understanding ARFID

(Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder)

A Detailed Resource Booklet for Parents, Carers, Educators and Professionals

1. What is ARFID?

ARFID stands for Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder. It is an eating disorder that involves significant difficulties with eating enough food, eating a variety of foods, or both.

ARFID is different from other eating disorders because it is not driven by body image concerns or a desire to lose weight. Instead, the difficulties are often connected to:

- Sensory sensitivities
- Anxiety
- Fear of choking, vomiting, or illness
- Lack of interest in eating
- Negative experiences with food

ARFID can affect children, teenagers, and adults. It can impact physical health, emotional wellbeing, social experiences, and family life.

2. Why Does ARFID Happen?

There is no single cause of ARFID. It usually develops through a combination of factors.

Common contributing factors include:

- Sensory processing differences
- Autism or ADHD

- Anxiety disorders
- Medical conditions affecting eating
- Gastrointestinal discomfort
- Traumatic food experiences
- Fear after choking or vomiting
- Difficulties recognising hunger cues

For many people, eating can feel overwhelming, unsafe, or physically uncomfortable. ARFID is not about stubbornness or attention-seeking.

3. How ARFID May Present

ARFID can look very different from person to person.

Some individuals may:

- Eat only a small number of “safe foods”
- Avoid foods based on texture, smell, colour, or temperature
- Have strong gag reflexes
- Fear choking or vomiting
- Eat very slowly
- Avoid meals socially
- Become distressed around new foods
- Skip meals due to lack of hunger awareness

Some people maintain weight, while others may experience weight loss, nutritional deficiencies, fatigue, or growth difficulties.

4. Sensory Processing and ARFID

Sensory sensitivities are a major part of ARFID for many individuals.

Food involves multiple sensory experiences:

- Taste

- Smell
- Texture
- Appearance
- Temperature
- Sound

A food that seems “normal” to one person may feel unbearable to someone with sensory differences.

Examples:

- Crunchy foods may feel safer than soft foods
- Mixed textures can feel overwhelming
- Strong smells may trigger nausea
- Certain colours may feel unsafe

Sensory-based food avoidance is real and deeply distressing for many people.

5. Anxiety and Fear-Based ARFID

Some individuals develop ARFID after frightening experiences related to food.

Examples include:

- Choking
- Vomiting
- Severe reflux
- Allergic reactions
- Pain while eating

This can create intense fear around eating. The brain begins to associate food with danger.

Signs of fear-based ARFID may include:

- Panic around meals
- Excessive chewing
- Refusing foods after illness
- Avoiding swallowing
- Fear of trying new foods

These fears are genuine and require compassionate support rather than pressure.

6. Understanding Safe Foods

Safe foods are foods that feel predictable, manageable, and emotionally safe.

Safe foods may:

- Always look the same
- Have consistent textures
- Come from specific brands
- Be prepared in exact ways

Changes to packaging, recipes, or presentation can feel distressing.

Examples:

- Only eating one brand of chicken nuggets
- Refusing food if it touches another food
- Needing food cut in specific shapes
- Eating foods at certain temperatures only

Safe foods provide stability and reduce anxiety.

7. Tips and Strategies for Supporting ARFID

Helpful approaches include:

- Reducing pressure around food
- Respecting safe foods
- Creating calm mealtime environments
- Offering food exposure without force
- Avoiding punishment or bribery
- Allowing choice and autonomy
- Supporting sensory needs
- Using predictable routines

Helpful phrases:

- “You do not have to eat it.”
- “You can explore the food in your own way.”
- “Would you like it on a separate plate?”
- “You can smell or touch it if you want.”

Progress is often slow and non-linear. Building safety is more important than forcing eating.

8. ARFID at School and Social Settings

School and social environments can be difficult for people with ARFID.

Challenges may include:

- Fear of judgment
- Limited safe foods available
- Pressure from adults
- Sensory overwhelm in dining halls
- Anxiety around eating in front of others

Helpful supports:

- Allowing packed safe foods
- Flexible eating arrangements
- Quiet spaces for eating
- Staff understanding and training
- Reducing shame around food differences

Children should never be punished or excluded due to food difficulties.

9. Emotional Impact of ARFID

ARFID can affect emotional wellbeing significantly.

Individuals may experience:

- Shame
- Anxiety
- Isolation
- Frustration
- Low self-esteem
- Fear of social situations

Parents and carers may also experience:

- Stress around meals
- Worry about nutrition
- Guilt or self-blame
- Exhaustion from managing eating difficulties

Supportive, non-judgmental understanding helps reduce emotional distress for everyone involved.

10. Helpful Support

ARFID is a real and serious eating disorder. It deserves understanding, compassion, and appropriate support.

Important reminders:

- ARFID is not “fussy eating”
- Eating difficulties are not behavioural choices
- Pressure often increases anxiety
- Safety and trust come first
- Small steps matter

Support may include:

- Dietitians
- Occupational therapists
- Speech and language therapists
- Mental health professionals
- Neurodiversity-affirming support

Every ARFID experience is unique. Listening to the individual and adapting support to their needs is essential.

Further Reading and Useful Organisations

- Beat Eating Disorders – <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk>
- ARFID Awareness UK – <https://www.arfidawarenessuk.org>
- National Autistic Society – <https://www.autism.org.uk>
- Sensory Integration Education –
<https://www.sensoryintegrationeducation.com>

This booklet is intended as an educational resource and does not replace medical or professional advice.