



## What is Oral Hypersensitivity or Defensiveness

"He gags all the time." "She fights me when I brush her teeth." "He hates it when I wash his face." "She won't let me wipe her nose." "He is a picky eater." "She overstuffs her mouth." "He grinds his teeth." "She chews on her fingers until there are calluses." "He drools all the time." "She won't chew her food." If this describes your child, s/he may be identified as having oral hypersensitivity or as being orally defensive.



For children with oral hypersensitivity brushing teeth can become a challenge!

Hypersensitivity occurs when a child's sensory threshold is lowered, creating a "system overload".

Hypersensitivity is characterized by strong and abnormal reactions to specific sensations on the face or in the mouth. For example, food touching the back of the tongue or throat can cause your child to gag.

Oral hypersensitivity or oral defensiveness can cause a significant amount of stress at meal times and can be a real concern for parents.

Oral hypersensitivity can be the result of a number of early childhood experiences including:

Milk allergies - hence some babies feed better on goats milk

Gastro Esophageal Reflux Disorder

Intubations over an extended period e.g. premature babies feeding by nasogastric tube or gastrointestinal tube

Children with low tone and uncoordinated swallows

## Health Professionals

Speech & Language Therapists:

Your child may be referred to a Speech & Language Therapist for therapy to address your child's feeding difficulties. Speech Therapists are trained to provide advice, strategies and techniques to overcome oral hypersensitivity. This may not be necessary for all children with hypersensitivity however, and your therapist will guide this decision making process with you.

## Expanding Your Child's Diet

Involve your child in preparing food. This helps increase their interest and enjoyment of food.

Try not to focus on the amount of food consumed or any 'messy eating', but rather on increasing the *variety* of foods and textures that your child will tolerate.

Offer a range of different textured foods with high nutritional value e.g. soft or crunchy fruits and vegetables vs. crisps or fast foods.

Make sure that new foods are offered in a fun, non-punitive way. Give lots of praise and rewards for even small changes to your child's tolerance for new foods.

Make small changes at first—try adding 1 new element for only 1 meal of the day. Rapid, broad stroke changes may result in food refusal!



The best method of treatment is the slow but systematic introduction of a variety of different tastes, temperatures and textures

Orally defensive children often like food at room temperature, but try changing the temperature of the foods you serve slowly over time (cold - luke warm - warm). Different temperatures offer different amounts of sensory stimulation.

Try varying the texture of foods offered (liquid - soft - hard - crunchy)

Try changing the consistency of foods (smooth - puree - lumpy - shredded solids - soft solids - normal solids)

Try to add herbs and spices to your child's food. This provides more sensory input than plain or bland foods, such as commercially available ready-made foods. This will help sensitise your child's mouth.

Also try drinks that have some 'fizz' - this provides plenty of oral stimulation!

## Strategies for Oral Stimulation

Toothbrushes - use them in the normal way plus try brushing across the tongue and the sides of the mouth. A soft electric toothbrush could work too, but be careful that the vibration of it doesn't startle your child!

Try a small finger brush - it fits over your finger and is used to brush the gums.

A strong piece of sterile tubing (from your G.P.) can be used to bite down on.



## Treatment Techniques

**Home Ideas:** Techniques commonly focus on the mouth and face areas of the body.

However, it may be necessary to include desensitization of the whole body.

Gradually introduce changes in the amount and duration of touching you expect your child to tolerate. Similarly make small gradual changes to the type of foods you introduce, as well as the frequency with which you introduce them

Initially it is best to introduce desensitization away from the mouth, for example let your child experience different touches and textures against his/her arm or leg

Your child may respond best to deep firm pressure touches initially with slow even strokes...the more predictable the better.

Gradually reduce the pressure as your child becomes comfortable.

Encourage 'mouthing' of toys and foods - this is a valuable way for your child to explore his environments and desensitize to oral contact.

Give your child a turn to do the teeth brushing - this gives children a sense of control over what is happening to them.

## Development of Hypersensitivity

Senses include touch, smell, taste, vision and hearing. If your child has oral hypersensitivity or sensory defensiveness, s/he may have a highly aroused nervous system, which may not recognize common sensations as non-threatening. For example, your child may not tolerate daily routines such as brushing teeth and may react with tantrums or refusals or may gag on lumpy foods.

**Feeding:** Many hypersensitive children resist trying new foods or textures and may cry or gag during meals.

**Tactile Sensitivity:** Many hypersensitive children show defensive behaviours, like avoiding teeth brushing, face washing, messy / dirty play such as play dough or finger painting. Some may even dislike environmental extremes like wind, rain and loud noises.

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## Oral Sensitivity in Children

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