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FOOD: CHEFS ENVY THIS COOKING **SCHOOL** / GROWN-UP **PICKY EATERS** / BEST **ICE-CREAM** PARLORS / ORLANDO'S TOP **EATS**

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HEALTH

Picky Eaters

Once considered a childhood quirk, picky eating is now recognized as a **FEEDING DISORDER**.

ONE OF MY FRIENDS SAYS SHE WON'T "DO" olives, mushrooms or anything curried. She's not wild about strawberries. Even whipped cream is off-limits. She is "officially" a picky eater. The notion of being happy with whatever lands on your plate is foreign to her.

It's common for children to go through a finicky phase, but for some, it lasts a lifetime. They are the hard-core picky eaters, and they have difficulty eating certain foods. In May, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a guide that helps mental-health specialists diagnose patients, defined picky eating as an "avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder." This is the first time that the manual has recognized a long-term feeding disorder that causes adults — not just infants and small children — to avoid certain foods because they're extremely sensitive to appearance, color, smell, texture, temperature or taste.

Unlike those with medical conditions like anorexia or bulimia, people with this umbrella disorder do not have body-image concerns like weight or shape. Nor are food allergies the problem. But how they perceive the food can be.

Take Bob Krause, who in 2003 created the website *PickyEatingAdults.com*, aka Picky Eating Adult Support. On a typical day, the Virginia Beach, Va., resident might down several vitamins, a bottle of a nutritional-supplement drink and a gulp of milk at breakfast. For lunch, he grabs a handful of peanuts and munches five slices of bacon plus a glass of milk. Later he grazes

on a pack of peanut-butter crackers. Dinner is buttered toast and a glass of milk. His last snack of the day is cheese popcorn. Once a week, he splurges with the elaborate menu of a grilled-cheese sandwich and fries.

"Most foods do not look like food to my brain," he says. Tomato-based products "are just gross" to him. Being around chili or spaghetti and meatballs can trigger a severe gag reflex.

The diet of Marla Lopez, a real-estate broker based in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, is also limited. She doesn't eat fruit or any meat other than bacon. Unlike Krause, who sometimes eats raw celery or carrots, she is unable to eat vegetables other than potatoes. Her mainstays are french fries, cereal, bread, potato chips, cookies and milk. Despite what sounds like the ultimate anti-South Beach diet, she is slim and her blood tests are normal.

That is not surprising, says Sondra Kronberg, MS,

RD, CEDRD, nutritional director of the Eating Disorder Treatment Collaborative/F.E.E.D. (Facilitated Eating Events and Direction) programs, which are based on Long Island and in New York City. Blood chemistry is usually the last thing that's going to go, she says. Blood will stay in a life-sustaining range unless a person is in a diseased state and the organs begin to malfunction.

One puzzling aspect of eating disorders in general is that some people's bodies can deteriorate in as little as six months while others may show no symptoms even after 10 years with an eating disorder.

10 Secrets to Helping Young Picky Eaters

1. Don't use food as rewards or bribes.
2. Kids eat what adults eat.
3. Eat family meals together.
4. Eat a variety of veggies.
5. Say, "You don't have to like it, but you do have to taste it," at every meal.
6. Don't allow snacking. It's OK to feel hungry.
7. Eat slowly.
8. Avoid processed food.
9. You should try a food multiple times before deciding whether you really like it. It may require seven to 12 tastings to be sure.
10. Try variations. Raw kale may seem weird, but you probably wouldn't notice it pureed in a smoothie.

Sources: Dietitian nutritionist Jessica Crandall and *French Kids Eat Everything* by Karen Le Billon



Whether picky eating is dangerous is uncertain. "It depends," says Kronberg, who is a spokeswoman for the National Eating Disorders Association. "Clearly there are some disadvantages and some potentially destructive results, but other people seem to adapt."

Jessica Crandall, a registered dietitian

nutritionist and the general manager at Denver Wellness and Nutrition-Sodexo, says picky eating can result in nutritional deficiencies and long-term health complications. Avoiding food groups like fruits and vegetables, which are high in fiber, can cause greater abdominal adiposity, or stomach fat, which can lead to complications like

diabetes, heart disease and metabolic syndrome. It can also raise the risk of colon cancer. Hard-core picky eaters, she says, "are absolutely putting themselves at risk for nutritional deficiencies."

Even so, how selective eating affects life span is hard to say. "As a nutritionist," Kronberg notes, "I have to believe that the more we give our body what it needs, the more it will respond to us. Is the selective eating these people do in their best interest? Because that's the way their brains and bodies are organized from way back when."

There's no simple explanation for what makes picky eaters different. Oversensitivity to certain textures seems to be a factor, says psychiatrist Nancy Zucker, who is director of the Duke Center for Eating Disorders.

Selective eaters may be turned off by foods with slimy or gelatinous textures — like cooked spinach or Jell-O — says Dr. Marcia Pelchat, a sensory scientist. The slippery bits inside a fresh tomato can be repulsive. And they do not like surprises. "They may like nuts and they may like brownies," says Pelchat, "but not nuts in brownies."

In some cases, picky eaters may have a more sensitive sense of taste. In others, there can be a fear of anything new.

Despite the social stigma associated with being an adult picky eater, those with the disorder cannot eat the foods they find repulsive. When asked whether they would consider taking a pill that would make them able to eat like everyone else, most surveyed said they would not, reports Pelchat. "When I look at food, I don't see food," says Lopez. She finds foods such as hot dogs, escargot, pizza and spaghetti inedible.

Any regular eater could gag thinking about somebody eating something disgusting, says Pelchat. For picky eaters, there are simply many more yucky foods. Some may have been affected by a lack of variety when they were young. Children who aren't introduced to solid foods and certain textures such as steak early enough may never feel comfortable manipulating it in their mouth. "They may, in fact, be more likely to gag on it," Pelchat says.

Parental and cultural expectations also can influence a person's openness to new foods, says Karen Le Billon, author of the book *French Kids Eat Everything*, which chronicles how her young daughters, who were 5 and 2 at the time, went from being

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picky eaters to happy omnivores during a year the family spent in France. Le Billon's daughters eat everything now, from sushi to seaweed and from beets to bulgur — even something as exotic as Roquefort cheese.

The French believe children can enjoy eating well, she says. They just need to be shown the way. "Feeding kids doesn't have to be a hassle," says Le Billon, whose next book, *Getting to Yum: 7 Secrets for Raising Eager Eaters*, is due out next April.

Le Billon says that French parents tell children, "Taste this; you'll like it," which works better than the North American approach — "Eat this; it's good for you" — that pushes nutrition. Plus, the French know it may take multiple taste tests before a child will accept a new food.

School lunches in France reinforce the idea that food is an adventure in the development of taste, Le Billon says. Preschoolers in the town of Versailles have been known to dive into an aristocratic-sounding four-course meal that includes grapefruit-and-lettuce salad with basil vinaigrette dressing and sautéed pork with curry-coconut sauce and white navy beans. "I do think they have food education figured out," Le Billon says.

Even before their first birthdays, French infants are introduced to leeks, asparagus and eggplant, according to Le Billon. Toddlers move fairly quickly through the picky-eating stage that hits around ages 2 or 3. You wouldn't expect your child to linger in the tantrum or "no" phases for life, says Le Billon. "Neither would you expect a child to be picky for life."

Still, Zucker, who has co-authored the first major study on picky eating among adults, is not convinced that adult picky eaters could have changed their ways in a different environment. According to her analysis of survey data, the parents of picky eaters may be role models of eating diversity yet some of their children may still turn out to be picky eaters.

The families Zucker works with have tried everything, she says. It may just be too hard for parents of the really picky eaters to change their child's eating habits. "They would have to be food therapists," she says. "It's just hard." 🍷

SANDRA YIN wrote about plastic wrap, Dr. Brown's soda and military slang for *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*. She wrote about the help available to navigate the complicated health-care system in *American Way's* May 1, 2013, issue.

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