

# Genes may be reason some kids are picky about food

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Parents may plead, cajole or entice their children to try new foods, but some kids just won't budge. Now, new research from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reveals that the reason these kids fear new foods has less to do with what's on their plate and more to do with their genes.

The work, led by Myles Faith, an associate professor of nutrition at UNC's Gillings School of Global Public Health, adds to the growing body of knowledge that [genes](#) play a significant role in children's eating behavior, including the tendency to avoid new foods.

"In some respects, food neophobia, or the aversion to trying new foods, is similar to child temperament or personality," said Faith, whose work appears today in the journal *Obesity*. "Some children are more genetically susceptible than others to avoid new foods. However, that doesn't mean that they can't change their behaviors and become a little less picky."

The study looked at 66 pairs of twins between ages 4 and 7 years old, and found that genes explain 72 percent of the variation among children in the tendency to avoid new foods, while the rest was influenced by environment. Previous research has shown a similar [genetic influence](#) for food neophobia in 8-to-11-year-olds (78 percent) and adults (69 percent), suggesting that the impact of genes on food neophobia is constant across the developmental spectrum.

Faith and his team also examined the relationship between food neophobia and body fat measures in both parent and child. Unexpectedly, the researchers found that if the parent was heavier, the child was heavier only if he or she avoided trying new foods.

"It's unexpected, but the finding certainly invites interesting questions about how food neophobia and temperament potentially shape longer-term eating and influence body weight," said Faith.

On the environmental side, the findings suggest that parents should consider each child's idiosyncrasies, even for [siblings](#) in the same household, when thinking about how to increase a child's acceptance of new foods. For example, parents can serve as role models and provide repeated exposure to new foods at home, or show their child how much they enjoy the [food](#) being avoided. They might also provide a choice of several new items from which a child could select.

"Each [child](#) may respond differently to each approach, and research needs to examine new interventions that take into account children's individuality," said Faith. "But what we do know through this and other emerging science is that this individuality includes genetic uniqueness."

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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