

The fear of trying new foods may have negative dietary implications

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A study conducted at the UPV/EHU-University of the Basque Country has concluded that neophobic children have a lower quality index in terms of the Mediterranean diet

Food neophobia is the fear of or refusal to try new foods. This is a typical feature in infant development. Nevertheless, it may end up becoming a habit even in adulthood. A study conducted at the UPV/EHU among [children](#) between 8 and 16 has concluded that the neophobic participants have a lower quality index in terms of the Mediterranean diet and, what is more, they have greater anxiety and lower self-esteem.

The behaviour involving rejection of new foodstuffs is a typical phase in [infant development](#), above all in 2- to 3-year-olds and which subsides around the age of 5. The children who go through dietary neophobia also display signs of anguish and anxiety and this behaviour may even turn into a habit in adulthood.

In her PhD thesis the researcher of the UPV/EHU's Faculty of Psychology Edurne Maiz conducted a study on 831 schoolchildren between the ages of 8 and 16. In the study she used questionnaires on infant neophobia -adapted for the thesis- in which the participants were asked about whether they were prepared to eat new foodstuffs. Various data were also gathered on the body composition of the participants as well as on their lifestyle (for example, diet and physical exercise), parental dietary styles and different variables (self-esteem and anxiety).

From all this, explained the researcher, "we have found statistically significant differences in many variables".

The importance of parental style

Neophobic behaviour may have negative dietary implications insofar as it reduces the variety of food eaten. The neophobic participants displayed a lower quality index in terms of the Mediterranean diet, and this is mainly due to the reduced consumption of fruit and vegetables and an increase in foods regarded as being for occasional consumption.

On the whole, [parents](#) tend to control what, how much and when their children eat. Very often parents try to get their children to eat new foodstuffs; the pressure parents exert caused by the frustration they feel when the food is rejected may negatively affect the child's emotional state, and what is more, is associated with greater levels of neophobia. In the research, the neophobic children reported that their parents use the parental feeding style known as stimulation and less control than the parents of neophilic children (children who eat everything and who like to try new foodstuffs). "We have deduced," explained Edurne Maiz, "that parents basically control and stimulate a lot, but a moment comes when they give up because parental suffering is also present in all this."

As regards anxiety, the data lead one to understand that both in childhood and adolescence, the neophobes are more anxious than the neophiliacs. Likewise, with respect to [self-esteem](#), neophobes scored in childhood less than the neophiliacs in the five dimensions studied within self-concept (family, social, physical, emotional and academic); and, in adolescence their scores in family and physical self-concept were lower.

In any case, no significant difference was found between them regarding [body composition](#). "This could be due to the fact that there are nutritional supplements which at a given moment can be taken as a food

supplement," said the researcher.

The researcher is keen "to send out a message to parents to be patient so that the cases of infant food neophobia do not develop or get worse," since "it has been seen that there are a considerable number of adults and children who have serious problems because of this," she explained. The researcher says that to avoid this problem it is important for there to be a strong parental bond with the child, and she also recommends "having a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere at mealtimes, that the children should participate in preparing the food and doing the shopping, using positive reinforcements and, finally, being a good model."

More information: Evaluación de la Obesidad Infantil: IMC versus Bioimpedancia. En Asociación Española de Psicología Conductual (Eds.), Avances en Psicología Clínica (pp. 54-58). Madrid. ISBN: 978-84-695-3599-8

"Neofobia y otros trastornos restrictivos alimentarios en la infancia y consumo de frutas y verduras", Revista Española de Nutrición Comunitaria (pp. 150-157) ISSN 1135-3074. [DOI: 10.14642/RENC.2014.20.4.5029](https://doi.org/10.14642/RENC.2014.20.4.5029)

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