



THE ARFID STARTER KIT

A practical guide for individuals, families, schools, and supporters

Created by the National ARFID Foundation

Reviewed by: NAF Team

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A Note Before You Begin

This guide is for educational purposes only. It does not provide medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. If you are concerned about ARFID or someone's health, please contact a qualified healthcare professional.

Welcome

If you are reading this guide, something brought you here. Maybe you are a parent who has noticed your child's list of "safe foods" getting shorter. Maybe you are a teen or young adult who has always felt like food is harder for you than it seems to be for everyone else. Maybe you are a teacher, school nurse, or coach who is worried about a student. Or maybe you are simply someone who loves a person who struggles with eating, and you want to understand and help.

Wherever you are starting from, we are glad you found this guide — and we want you to know something important: you are not alone, and this is not your fault.

Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder, or ARFID, is still not widely understood. It can be confused with picky eating, stubbornness, or anxiety, which means families often go years without answers, and individuals often feel dismissed or misunderstood. That confusion is not a reflection of you or your situation. It is simply a sign that more education is needed — which is exactly why this guide exists.

This Starter Kit is meant to be a starting point, not a complete roadmap. It will not replace a doctor, therapist, or dietitian, and it cannot diagnose ARFID. What it can do is help you understand the basics, recognize common patterns, find the right kinds of support, and feel a little more confident having these conversations — whether with a child, a student, a friend, or yourself.

Support is possible. Many people with ARFID go on to build a healthier, more flexible relationship with food, at a pace that works for them. You do not have to figure everything out today, and you do not have to figure it out alone.

With care,

The National ARFID Foundation Team

What Is ARFID?

ARFID stands for Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder. It is a recognized eating disorder that involves avoiding or restricting certain foods, or not eating enough overall — in ways that affect a person's nutrition, growth, energy, or daily life.

A Few Important Clarifications

ARFID is not just picky eating. Picky eating is common and often mild; ARFID involves significant impact on health, nutrition, or functioning.

ARFID is not primarily about body image or fear of weight gain. Unlike some other eating disorders, the avoidance in ARFID is usually driven by sensory experience, fear, or low interest in food — not a desire to be thinner.

Three Common ARFID Patterns

People with ARFID often experience one or more of the following patterns. These patterns can appear alone or together, and they can look different from person to person.

1. Sensory Sensitivity

Avoiding foods because of texture, smell, taste, color, temperature, or appearance. A food that seems perfectly normal to one person may feel genuinely intolerable to someone with sensory sensitivity.

2. Fear of Consequences

Avoiding eating because of fear of choking, vomiting, stomach pain, allergic reactions, or other negative outcomes. This fear is often connected to a past frightening experience, but not always.

3. Low Interest in Eating

Not feeling hungry, getting full quickly, forgetting to eat, or finding the act of eating exhausting or uninteresting. This pattern can be especially easy to overlook because it does not always involve visible distress.

These patterns are not character flaws, and they are not something a person chooses. For many people with ARFID, eating involves real physical or emotional barriers — and understanding those barriers is the first step toward support.

ARFID vs. Picky Eating

Almost everyone has food preferences, and many children go through picky phases. So how can you tell the difference between typical picky eating and a possible ARFID concern? The table below offers a general comparison — it is not a diagnostic tool, but it can help you decide whether it may be worth talking to a professional.

Typical Picky Eating	Possible ARFID Concern
A fairly wide range of accepted foods within a few categories.	A very narrow list of “safe” foods, sometimes fewer than 10–20 total.
Some complaints or fussiness, but limited emotional distress.	Significant fear, anxiety, gagging, or distress around meals or new foods.
Weight, growth, energy, and nutrition stay on track.	Weight loss, slowed growth, fatigue, or nutrient deficiencies may be present.
Can usually manage restaurants, school lunch, travel, and parties with minor adjustments.	May avoid or have major difficulty with restaurants, school lunch, travel, or sleepovers.
Often improves gradually with time and gentle exposure.	May stay the same or get worse over time without support.
Daily life, school, and social activities are not significantly disrupted.	Food concerns interfere with school, friendships, sports, or family life.

ARFID is not about being dramatic, stubborn, or difficult. For many people, food can feel unsafe, overwhelming, or impossible — and that experience deserves understanding, not judgment.

Signs Someone May Need Help

If several of the following are true, it may be worth scheduling an appointment with a doctor or another qualified professional. You do not need to check every box for it to be worth asking for help.

- Very limited food variety
- Dropping previously “safe” foods over time
- Major distress around meals
- Avoiding restaurants, school lunch, travel, or social events
- Weight loss or failure to gain expected weight
- Fatigue, dizziness, weakness, or poor concentration
- Dependence on supplements or meal replacements
- Fear of choking, vomiting, allergic reactions, contamination, or stomach pain
- Major family conflict or anxiety around eating
- Trouble participating in school, sports, travel, or normal activities because of food

When This May Be Urgent

Contact a medical professional promptly if food restriction is causing weight loss, fainting, dehydration, weakness, rapid physical decline, inability to eat enough, or major changes in daily functioning.

Who Can Help?

ARFID care often involves more than one professional, and that is completely normal. Below is a general overview of the roles different providers may play. Not everyone needs all of these — your team will depend on the individual's needs.

Primary Care Doctor or Pediatrician

Checks weight, growth, vitals, labs, and nutrition concerns, and helps determine medical stability. This is often the first stop.

Therapist or Psychologist

Helps with anxiety, fear, avoidance, exposure work, and coping skills, especially when fear of consequences is part of the picture.

Registered Dietitian

Helps with nutrition planning, safe-food planning, gradual food expansion, and addressing nutritional deficiencies.

Gastroenterologist or Specialist

May be involved if there are concerns about stomach pain, reflux, choking, allergies, or other underlying medical issues.

Occupational Therapist or Feeding Therapist

May help with sensory sensitivity and feeding skills, especially for younger children.

Different people need different combinations of support. A care team might include just one of these professionals, or several working together — there is no single “right” team for everyone.

Questions to Ask a Doctor, Therapist, or Dietitian

Finding the right provider can take time, and it is okay to ask questions before committing to care. This page is designed to be printed and brought to an appointment.

- Have you worked with ARFID before?
- How do you assess ARFID?
- What treatment approach do you use?
- Do you work with sensory sensitivity, fear of vomiting/choking, low appetite, or other ARFID patterns?
- Do you coordinate with dietitians, physicians, or therapists?
- What medical signs should we monitor?
- What should we do while waiting for care?
- How do you involve parents or family?
- What are signs that a higher level of care may be needed?
- What small steps can we take safely right now?

Tip: bring a notebook or use the space below to jot down answers during the appointment.

Notes: _____

Treatment Overview and Helpful Language

Treatment for ARFID depends on the person’s age, symptoms, medical needs, and which ARFID pattern (or patterns) are present. There is no single approach that works for everyone, and a good care team will tailor the plan to the individual.

Treatment may include a combination of:

- Medical monitoring
- Nutrition support
- Therapy
- Gradual exposure to new foods
- Anxiety support
- Family involvement
- Support for school, travel, or social situations

One ARFID-specific therapy approach you may hear about is CBT-AR (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder). It is a structured, evidence-informed approach designed specifically for ARFID — but it is one option among several, not the only path forward and not a guaranteed cure for every person.

What to Say Instead

Even well-meaning comments about food can feel dismissive to someone with ARFID. Small shifts in language can make a big difference.

Instead of:
“Just eat it.”

Try:
“I know this feels hard. Let’s figure out one small step.”

Instead of:
“You’re being picky.”

Try:
“I can see this food feels unsafe or overwhelming.”

Instead of:
“Everyone else can eat this.”

Try:
“Your experience is real, and we’re going to get support.”

Instead of:
“You have to finish everything.”

Try:
“Let’s focus on staying nourished and working with your care team.”

Support at School, With Friends, and as a Teen/Young Adult

For School Nurses, Counselors, Teachers, and Advisors

Students with ARFID may struggle with parts of the school day that involve food, including:

- School lunch
- Eating around peers
- Long school days without enough nutrition
- Field trips
- Sports
- Food-based events
- Comments from classmates

Possible supports schools can offer:

- Permission to bring safe foods
- Flexible snack timing
- A private or low-pressure eating space
- No public comments about a student's food choices
- Coordination with parents and healthcare providers

For Teens and Young Adults

Navigating food with ARFID can feel especially complicated as you take on more independence — school lunch, restaurants, sleepovers, sports, travel, college, and eating with friends all come with their own challenges. What you are feeling is real, and you are not the only one who experiences this.

A few things that may help:

- Make a safe-food list you can reference or share
- Identify portable foods you can bring with you
- Tell one trusted adult what is going on
- Prepare a short, simple explanation to share with friends
- Ask for help before things become urgent
- Plan ahead for travel, school, or college transitions

My ARFID Snapshot Worksheet

This worksheet is for personal use — to help you reflect, prepare for an appointment, or open a conversation with someone you trust.

My Current Safe Foods

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Foods I Recently Lost

1. _____
2. _____

Foods I Want to Work Toward Someday

1. _____
2. _____

Hardest Eating Situations

- School lunch
- Restaurants
- Travel
- Eating with friends
- Eating alone
- Family meals
- Other: _____

My Biggest Fear or Barrier

- Texture
- Taste
- Smell
- Choking
- Vomiting
- Stomach pain
- Low appetite
- Allergic reaction
- Not sure

People Who Can Help Me

- Parent/guardian
- Doctor
- Therapist
- Dietitian
- School counselor
- Friend
- Other: _____

Resource List

These links and organizations are informational resources, not endorsements.

Learn About ARFID: <https://www.nationalarfidfoundation.org/arfid-organ>

Find Support: <https://www.nationalarfidfoundation.org/general-5>

ARFID Research: <https://www.nationalarfidfoundation.org/general-5-2>

About the National ARFID Foundation

The National ARFID Foundation is a youth-led educational organization created to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and connect individuals and families with ARFID-related resources. The foundation focuses on education, awareness, and resource navigation, not medical treatment.

- Website launched in November 2024
- Created to help families, teens, schools, and supporters better understand ARFID

Website: www.nationalarfidfoundation.org | Contact: nationalarfidfoundation@gmail.com |

This guide is educational and does not provide medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Please contact qualified healthcare professionals for medical concerns. If someone is medically unstable or in immediate danger, seek emergency care.