



Interoception and eating

Interoception is the term used to describe the awareness of our body sensations; for example, feeling that we have a full bladder, a full stomach, a dry mouth or a sore foot. These feelings send messages to our brain to take action; for example, to go to the toilet, to stop eating, to quench our thirst or to check our foot for an injury and seek medical attention if required.

Some people are over-responsive to interoceptive information, and others may be under-responsive to input. This resource focuses on under-responsiveness and how it can affect eating habits.

Under-responsiveness to interoceptive information

Under-responsiveness in the interoceptive system can affect the child or young person’s ability to notice how their stomach is feeling. This means that they may not register that their stomach is empty so they do not know to eat, or they may not register when their stomach is full so they do not know to stop eating. They may also have difficulty recognising thirst and when to get a drink.

Teaching interoceptive awareness

Supporting a child or young person to become more aware of their interoceptive system as a whole may help them to recognise cues for hunger. This means exploring and identifying different body sensations and providing a means for the child or young person to both understand and communicate these feelings, i.e. via visual supports or verbally.

The visual body map provided can be used to explore internal body sensations and what these mean. Once the child or young person recognises the sensation and what it means, they can be taught what action to take.

In terms of eating and drinking, this process may look like this:

Sensation	Meaning	Action
Stomach feels empty	Hunger/time to eat	Eat a snack or meal
Stomach feels full	No more food is needed	Stop eating
Mouth/throat feels dry	Thirst/time for a drink	Drink some water

Schedules

Some children and young people may not yet be ready to develop an awareness of interoceptive input and what it means. They may not detect sensations from within the body or be able to apply meaning to the feelings. A schedule may therefore be used to show them when to eat and drink. The schedule will prompt them that it is time for a meal or snack, and remind them to drink regularly.

Please note that some of this information is based on the Interoception Curriculum; written by Kelly Mahler, Chloe Rothschild and Jarvis Alma.