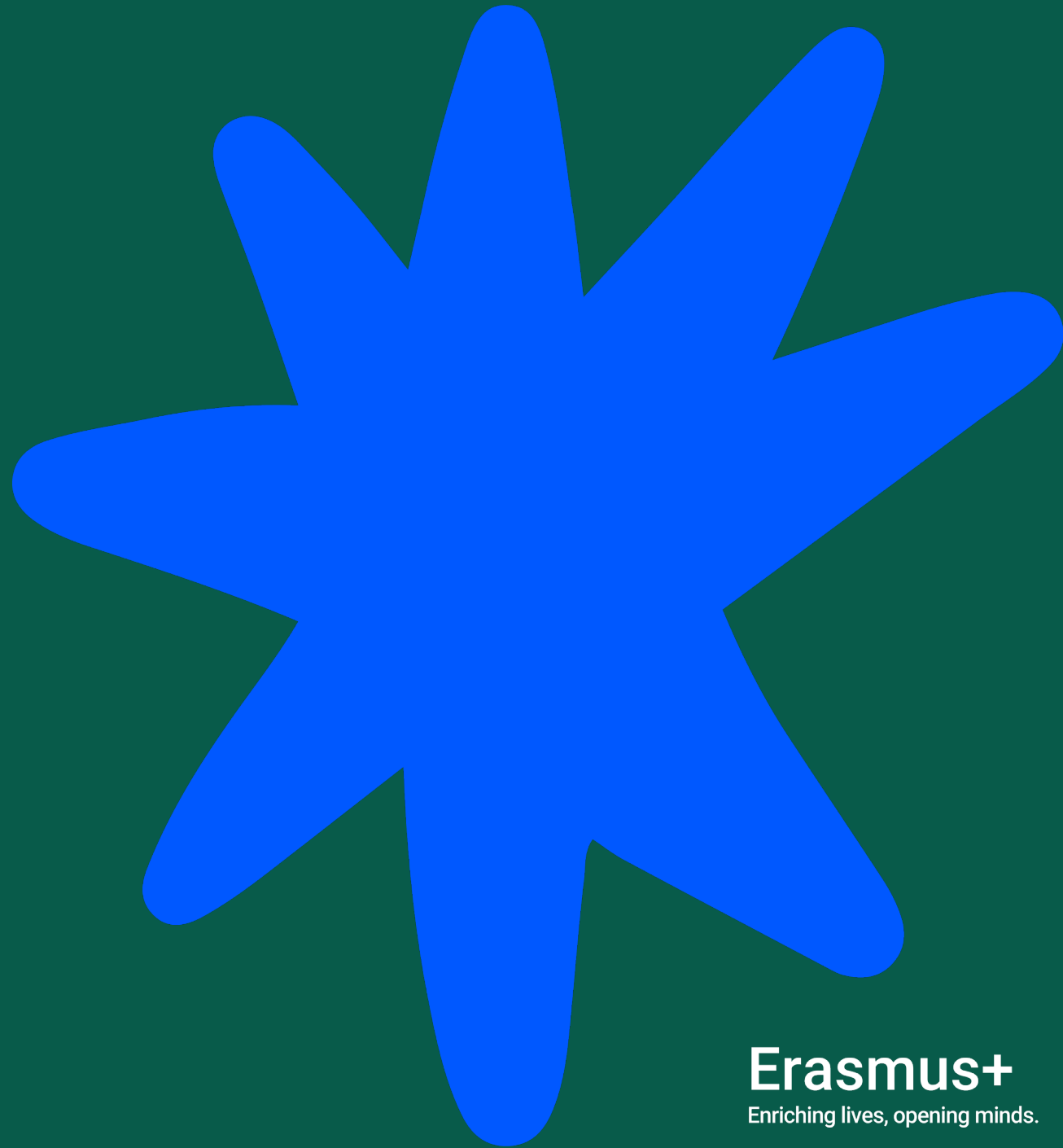


APIA project

A summary of survey results



Presentation of the project

The APIA for autism project was launched on **31 December 2023 and will run for 36 months, until 31 December 2026**. Its main objectives are:

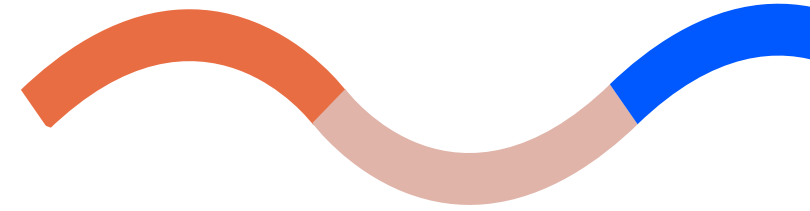


Promotes **inclusion and independence of adults with autism** through tailored nutrition.



Provides **tools to support professionals and caregivers** in improving autonomy and well-being.

Consortium



FOOD EXPERTS

Universidad de Zaragoza – Spain: nutrition professors and researchers

Les Insatiables – France: project coordinator and sustainable food vision



AUTISM EXPERTS

Fondazione per l'Autismo A18 – Italy: specialist psychiatrists

CADIS – Spain: group of associations working with disabilities, including autism



RESEARCH & CONSULTING EXPERT, EUROPEAN PROJECT COORDINATOR

Association Pour La Solidarité – Belgium: quantitative and qualitative survey expert



Methodology of the surveys

In order to bring this ambitious project to fruition, the first year — from January 2024 to March 2025 served as **a theoretical foundation for identifying key issues and guiding the next stages of research and intervention.**

- * **Literature review**
Identifying the nutrition information deficit in adults with autism
- * **Functional analysis**
Observing the eating behaviours of adults with autism
- * **Qualitative survey**
Exploring the practices and needs of professionals and family carers
- * **Quantitative survey**
Validation of needs identified on a larger scale
- * **Delphi method**
Prioritisation of themes by professionals

* Literature review



At the start of the project, **Sara Remón, Ana Ferrer-Mairal & Teresa Sanclemente** (*Universidad de Zaragoza*) reviewed **43 scientific articles** on nutrition and autism in adults.



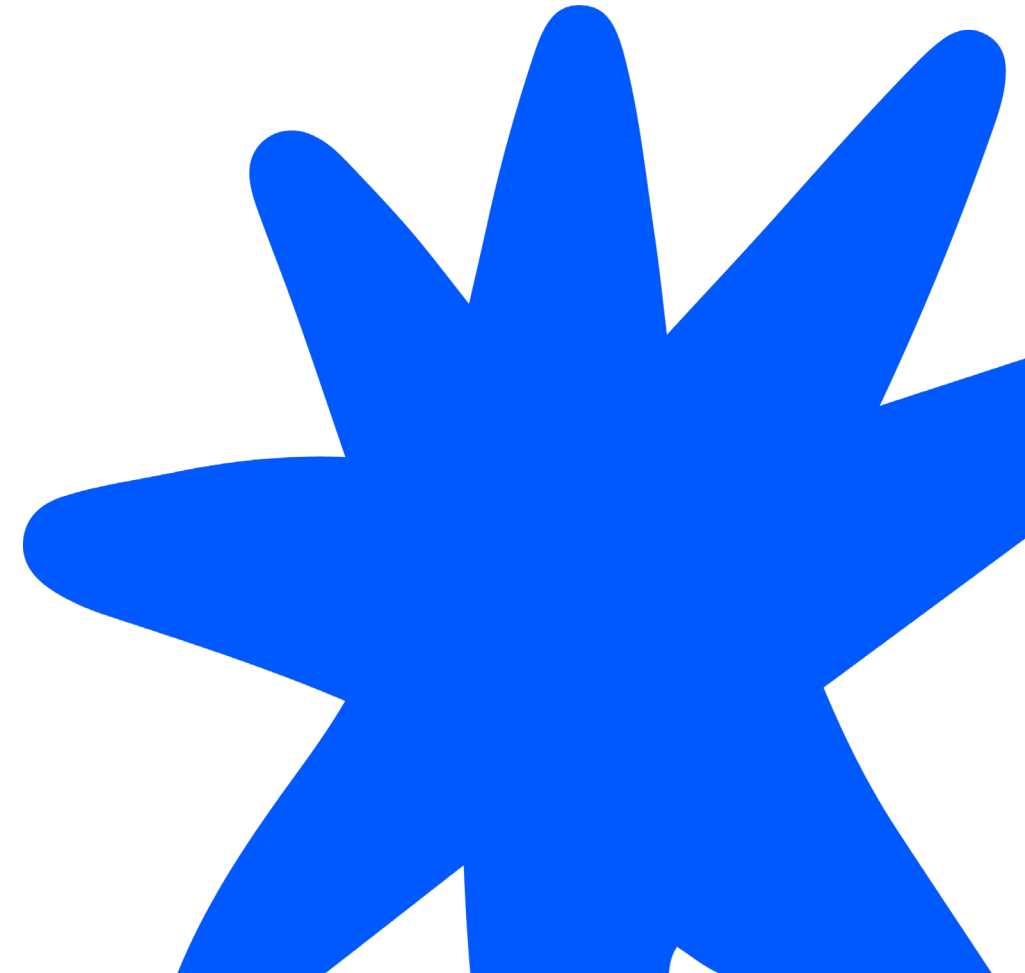
They published a peer-reviewed article: "**Food and Nutrition in Autistic Adults: Knowledge Gaps and Future Perspectives**" *Nutrients*, 2025

 [Read the full article here](#)

* Functional analyses

Each involved **observing autistic adults before, during, and after meals** over several days to better understand their relationship with food.

Organization	Number of analyses conducted
A18	13
CADIS Huesca	3
Total	16



* Qualitative surveys

15 interviews with autism professionals and caregivers across all partner countries.

Country	Participants
Belgium	2
Spain	10
France	2
Italy	1
Total	20



* Quantitative surveys

An online survey was distributed across the 4 participating countries. **168 responses were collected from professionals and family caregivers.**

Country	Total	Professionals	Caregivers
France	73	37	36
Italy	39	14	25
Spain	33	13	20
Belgium	23	9	14
Total	168	73	95

* Delphi method

We collected the **opinions of various experts** (including nutritionists, psychologists, speech therapists, and others) on the most important topics to address in our guides by using the Delphi method.

Country	Respondents
Belgium	6
Spain	5
France	6
Italy	3

Country	Respondents
Belgium	1
Spain	5
France	3
Italy	4

Main findings

The following insights explore the **complex relationship between autism and diet**, shedding light on sensory sensitivities, behavioral challenges, dietary patterns, and the practical constraints faced in care settings, **as reported by survey respondents and professionals in the field.**

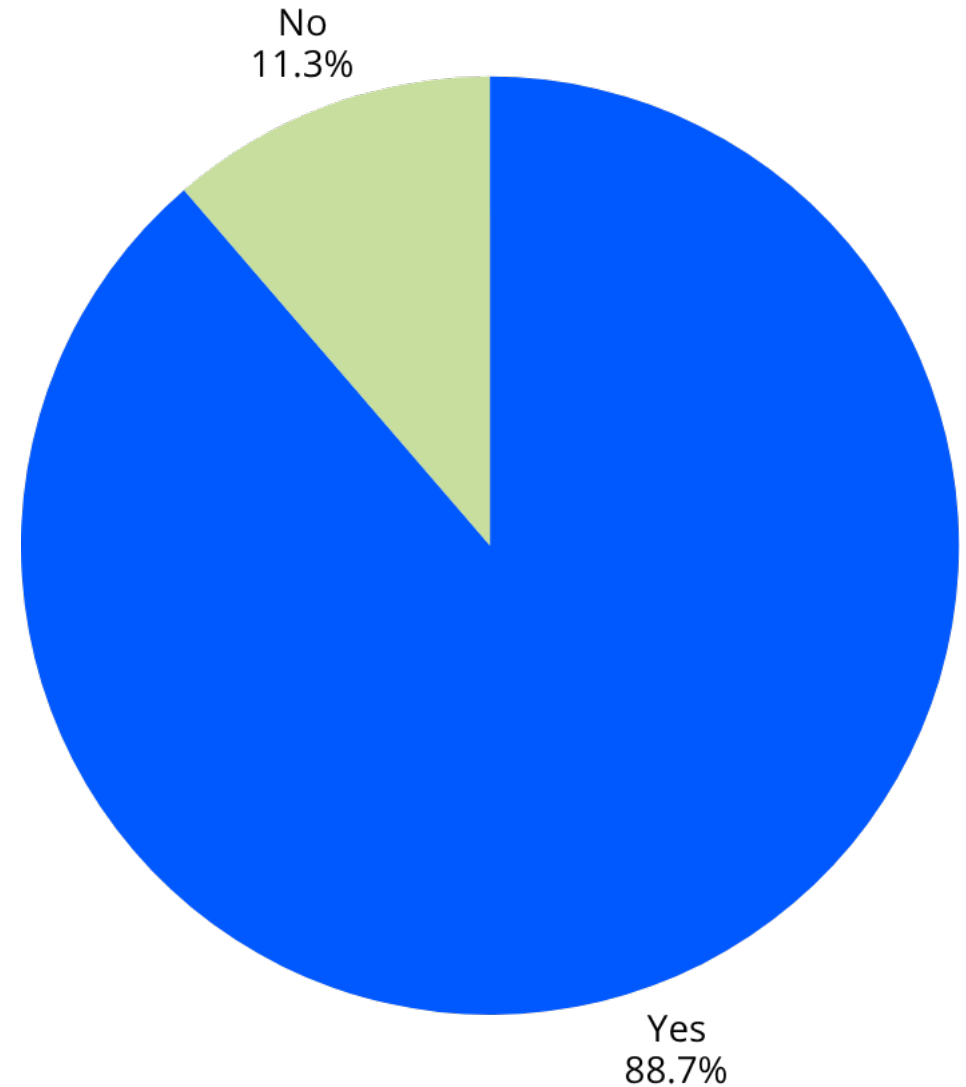


Autism and diet

Which processes are at play?

90.7%

of respondents **agreed that there is a connection between the sensory characteristics of food and problematic behaviors** during meals.

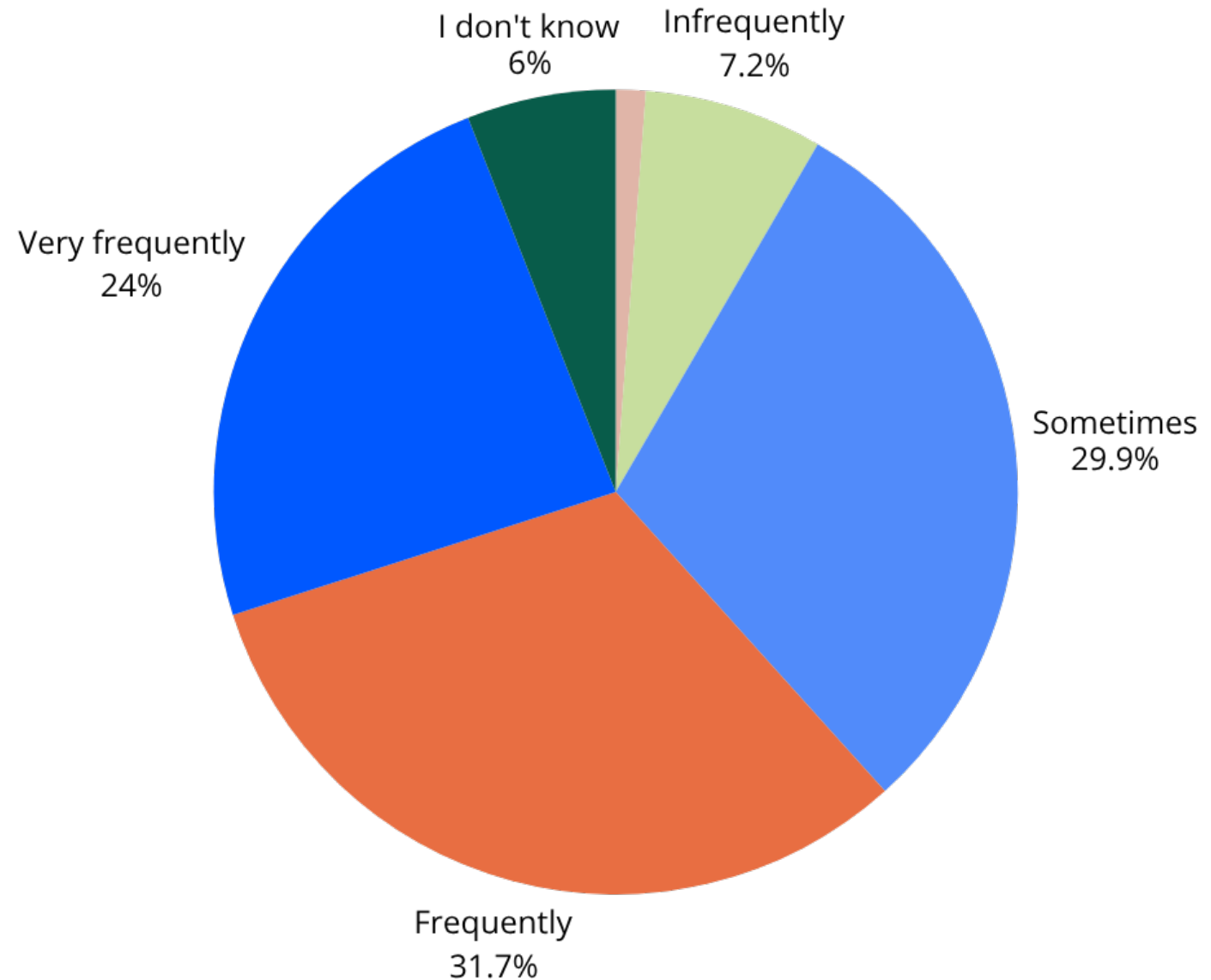


Autism and diet

Which processes are at play?

55.7%

of respondents indicated that **challenging behaviors frequently or very frequently interfere with ease of eating** during meals.



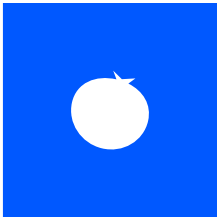
Autism and diet

What is at play?



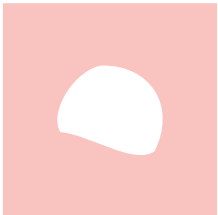
Cognitive Rigidity & Sensory Sensitivity

Disrupt family routines & cause tension during meals.



Food Selectivity

Preference for specific foods limits dietary variety.

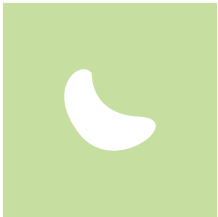


Neophobia (Fear of New Foods)

Makes it difficult to introduce a balanced diet.

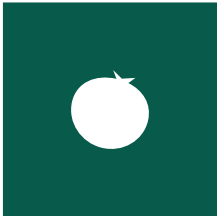
Autism and diet

What is at play?



Individual Food Patterns

Preferences and aversions vary greatly among individuals.



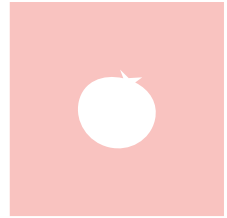
Communication Difficulties

Affect mealtime cooperation & management of challenging behaviors.



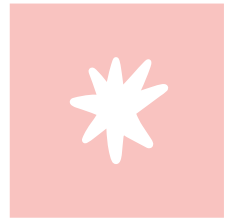
Autism and diet

What is the average diet quality of individuals with autism?



Poor eating habits

Frequent consumption of high-calorie, ultra-processed foods leads to poorer physical health compared to non-autistic individuals.



Obesity & underweight

These conditions are common and linked to difficulties with physical activities and medication side effects, not just diet.



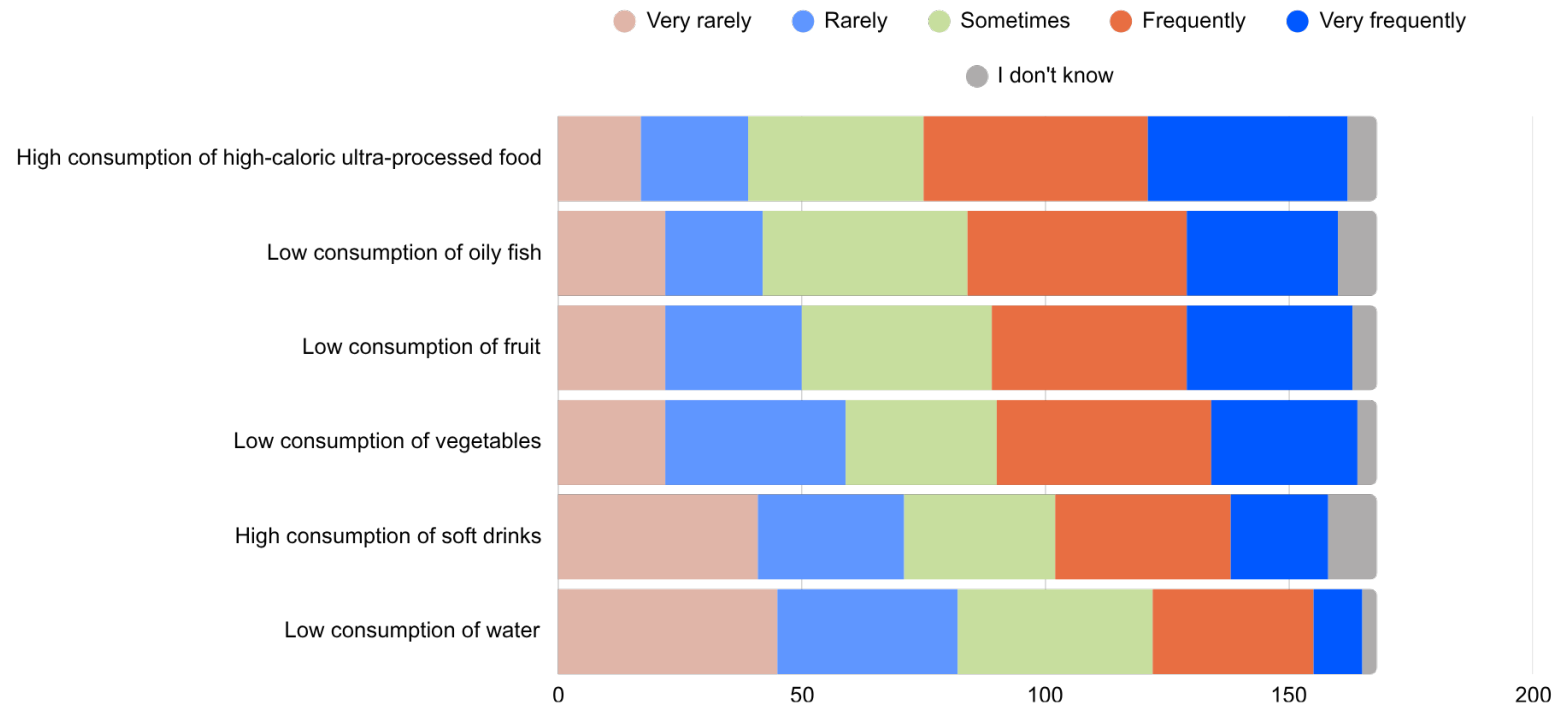
Other health issues

Increased risk of diabetes, heart disease, gastrointestinal issues, sleep disorders, and mental health challenges.

Autism and diet

What is the average diet quality of individuals with autism?

Adults with autism often face poor physical health, partly due to frequent consumption of ultra-processed foods and difficulties with physical activity. Common issues include obesity, underweight, diabetes, heart disease, gastrointestinal and sleep disorders, and mental health challenges.



Autism and diet

What is the average diet quality of autistic individuals?

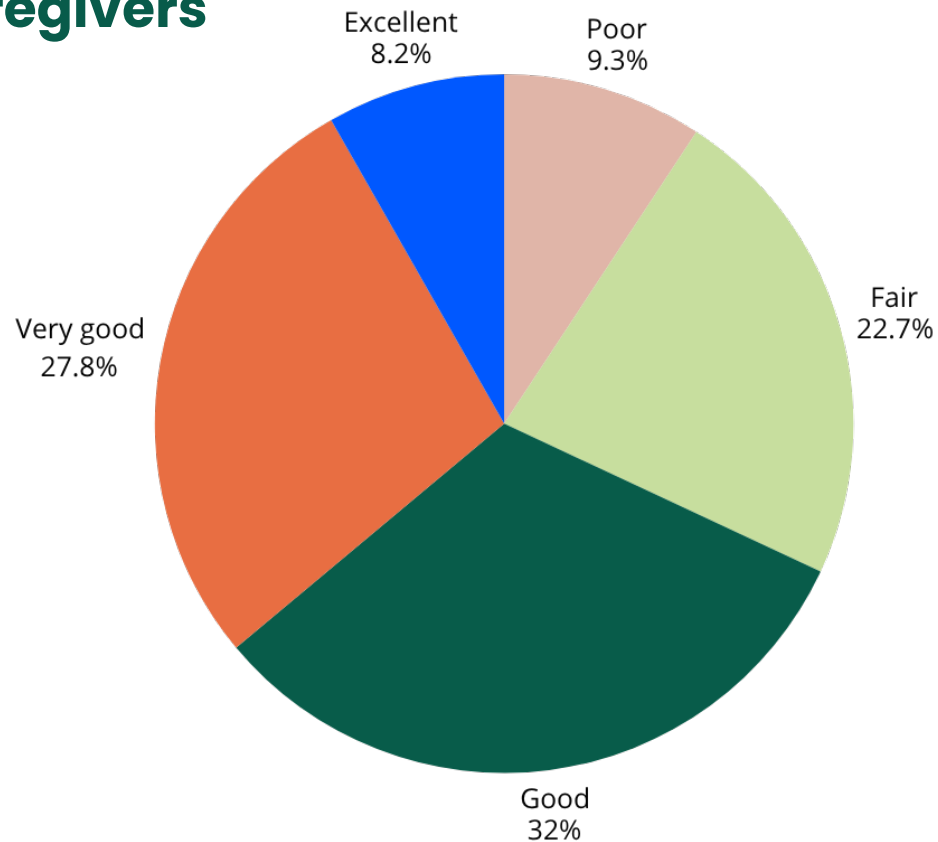
The **context and environment can also play an important role in the quality of nutrition.** Our survey revealed a difference in the perceived quality of the diet of individuals with autism depending if they were with their family or in center.



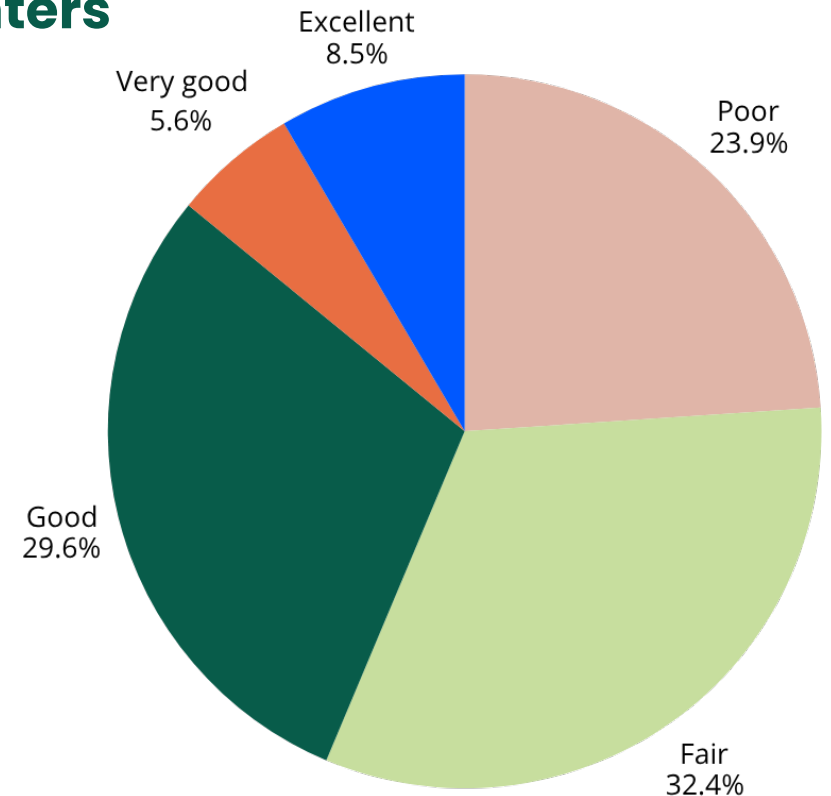
Autism and diet

How would you evaluate the diet quality of the individuals with autism you work with or care for?

Caregivers



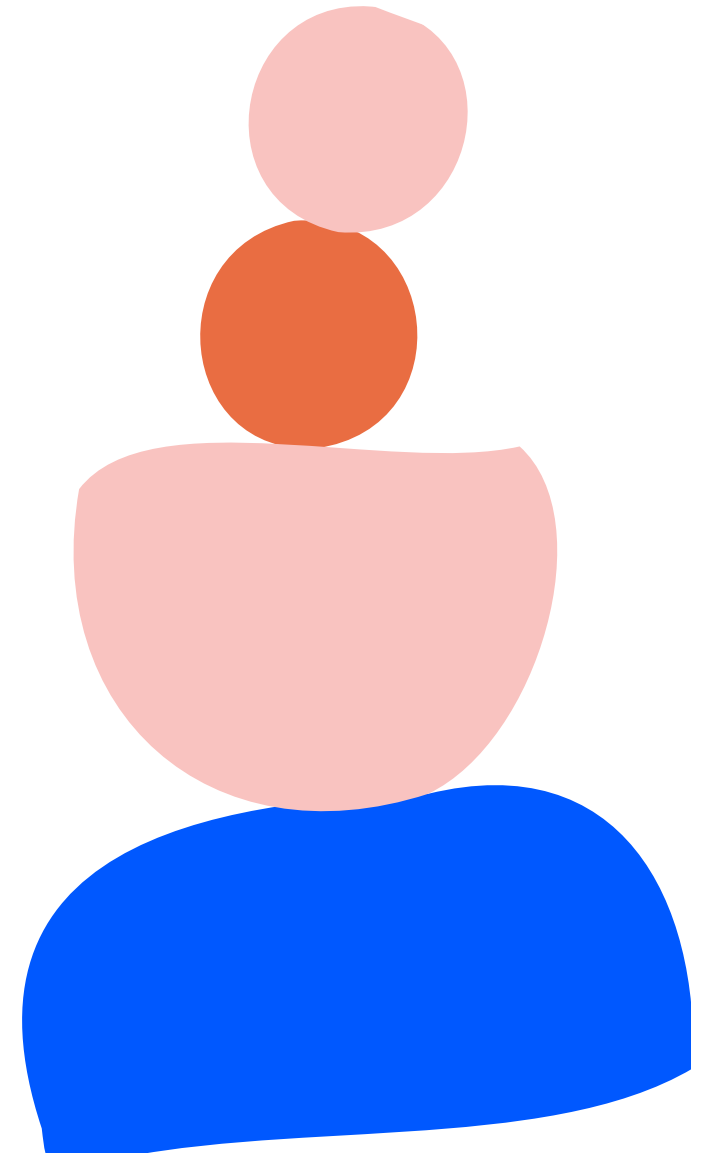
Centers



Autism and diet

Practical constraints of the centers

Communication difficulties, a lack of specialized staff training, and, most significantly, financial constraints hindered the implementation of personalized diets in the centers.

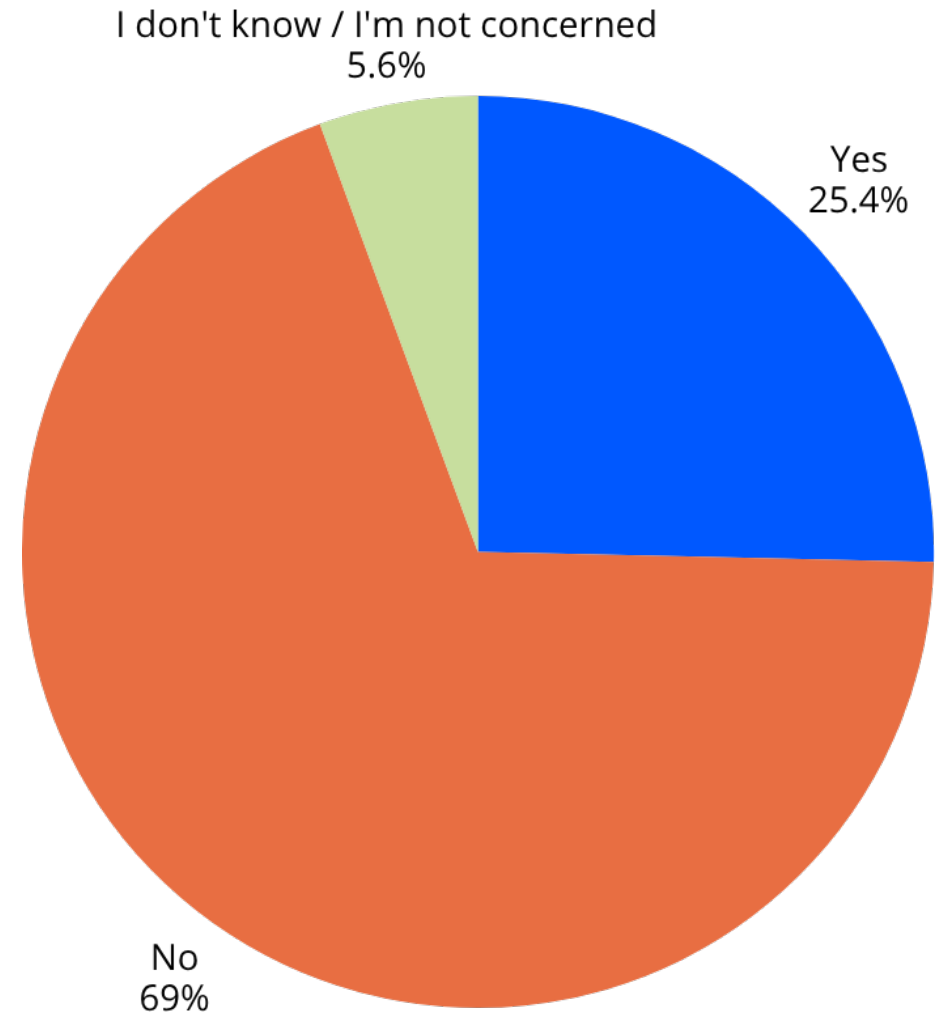


Autism and diet

Practical constraints of the centers

69%

of professionals reported **not having sufficient means to adapt the diet** of the individuals they support based on their sensory.



Autism and diet

What seems to work?



Method 1:
Gradual exposure

- * **Repetition combined with gradual progression**
- * **Careful pressure management** to prevent sensory or emotional overload
- * **Repeated exposure** to new foods to encourage a broader diet



Method 2:
Positive reinforcement & supportive environment

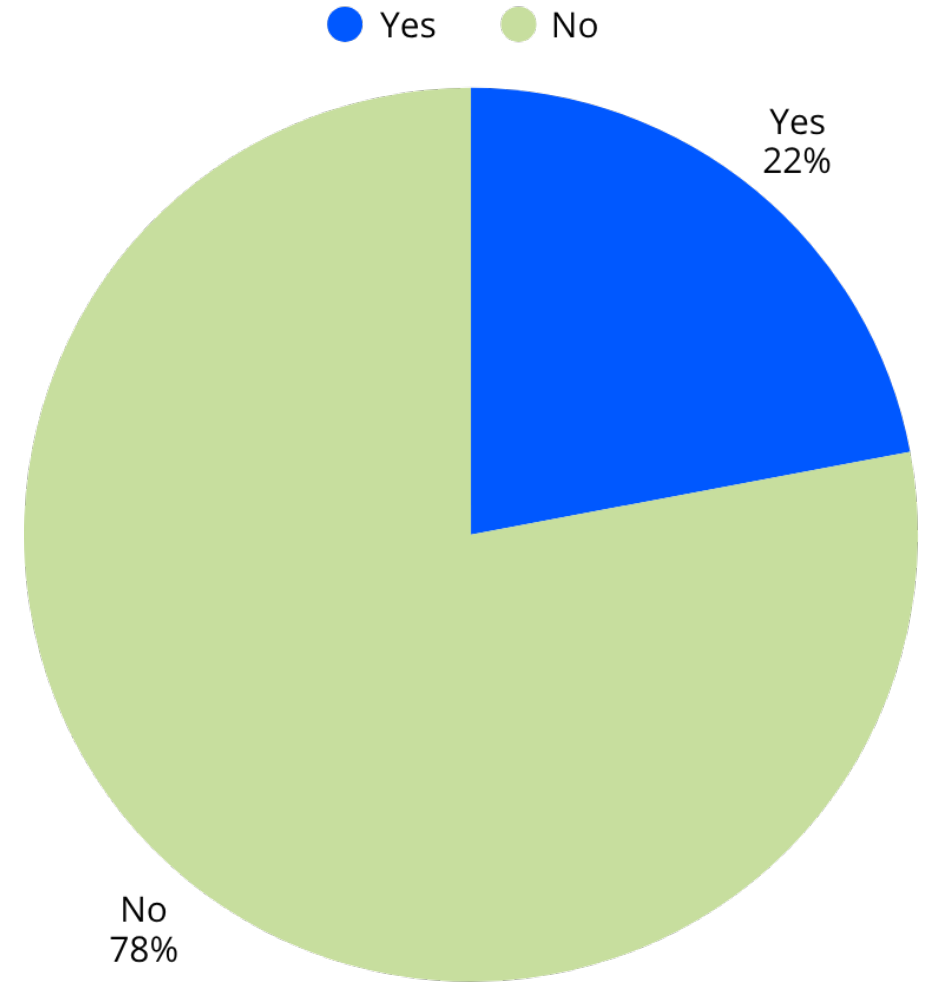
- * **Use of rewards** as positive reinforcement
- * **Building trust** with caregivers
- * **Emphasizing calmness, consistency and predictability**
- * **Leveraging the imitation effect** in individuals with autism

Autism and diet

Training needs

78%

of **family caregivers and professionals** reported **feeling inadequately informed about the dietary needs** of individuals with autism.



Autism and diet

Training needs

In general, the following topics were considered the most important to include in a training:

- ✔ **Understanding and managing food sensitivities** in individuals with autism
- ✔ **General nutritional knowledge**
- ✔ **Practical meal strategies**
- ✔ **Tools and methods** for analyzing eating behaviors

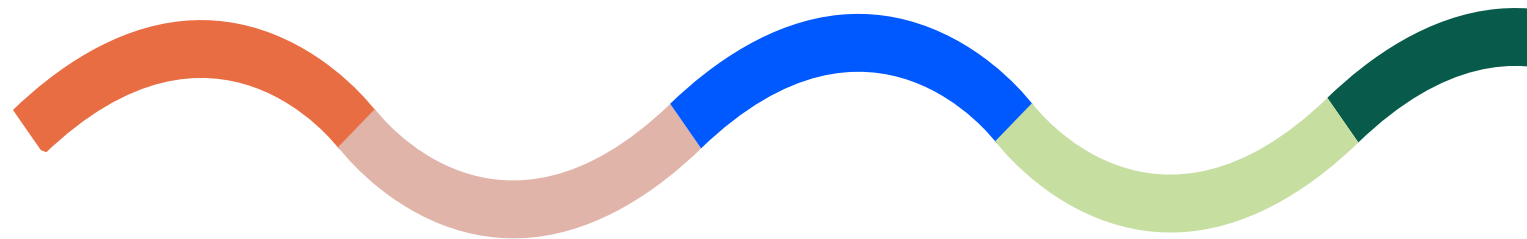


Autism and diet

Policy recommendations

Common recommendations from participants included:

- **Train healthcare professionals** on autism-adapted nutrition
- **Allocate more resources** to institutions
- **Integrate autism-trained nutritionists** in care facilities
- **Promote long-term nutritional education** for individuals with autism
- **Balance theoretical training with practical support**



Thank you!



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