

The No-Thinking Food Formula

A flexible way to build food on difficult days

When deciding what to eat uses more energy than eating itself, a formula can replace an open-ended decision with a small set of choices. The No-Thinking Food Formula is not a diet, a meal plan or a demand to create a perfectly balanced plate. It is a practical route from “I need something” to food that is safe, available and manageable.

The basic formula is: **one energy food + one sustaining food + one familiar flavour or texture + a drink**. An optional extra can be added when capacity allows. The parts may be combined, kept completely separate, eaten in any order or chosen from the same repeated safe foods.

The formula serves the person; the person does not have to serve the formula.

General nutrition guidance is often presented as if every meal must look ideal. The NHS Eatwell Guide instead considers balance across a day or even a week. For people with ARFID, sensory differences, allergies, medical diets or a limited range of safe foods, adaptation may require individual advice from a registered dietitian or relevant clinician.

The five-part formula

Part	What it contributes	Examples to adapt
1 Energy food	A familiar source of energy and often the base of the meal.	Bread, rice, pasta, potato, cereal, crackers, wrap or another safe carbohydrate.
2 Sustaining food	Protein and/or fat that may help the food feel more sustaining.	Egg, cheese or alternative, yoghurt, beans, fish, meat, nut-free spread or another tolerated choice.
3 Familiar flavour or texture	Predictability and sensory safety.	Preferred sauce, seasoning, spread, crunch, smoothness, temperature or keeping items plain.
4 Drink	Hydration alongside food.	Water, squash, milk or tolerated alternative, tea, soup or another manageable drink.
5 Optional extra	Variety when it is realistic, never a pass-or-fail requirement.	A safe fruit or vegetable, fortified food, side item or something prepared for later.

What counts as a meal

A meal can be toast with a tolerated topping and a drink. It can be microwave rice with an egg served separately. It can be cereal, yoghurt and a drink. It can also be only one available safe food when that is all the person can manage. The formula is a prompt, not a rule: start with one part and add only what is possible.

Choose by capacity, not expectation

Capacity	Use the formula like this	Example structure
Very low	Choose one ready food and one drink. Stop there if needed.	Crackers + drink; cereal bar + drink; nourishing drink if personally suitable.
Low	Choose an energy food and one sustaining addition. No optional extra.	Toast + egg; rice + familiar protein; cereal + tolerated milk.
Moderate	Use the four core parts. Keep preparation to one appliance.	Microwave potato + filling + familiar flavour + drink.
More available	Add the optional extra or prepare one component for another day.	Simple cooked meal + safe side + labelled extra portion.

The two-choice method

Do not search every cupboard or scroll through dozens of recipes. Offer yourself two realistic choices: “toast or rice?”, then “egg or cheese alternative?”, then “plain or preferred sauce?”. If neither works, return to the emergency safe food. Reducing the field is not limiting yourself; it is removing unnecessary cognitive load.

Sensory-led adaptations

Texture: choose smooth, dry, crunchy, soft or uniform foods and avoid mixing when that changes predictability.

Temperature: cold, room-temperature and hot versions of the same food can feel completely different. **Smell:** use no-cook foods, lids, ventilation or another person’s help. **Presentation:** use familiar crockery, separate sections and known portions. **Brand consistency:** keep the packaging or photograph it so the correct version can be replaced.

Formula examples without rigid recipes

Energy food	Sustaining food	Familiar element	Drink
Toast	Egg or safe alternative	Preferred spread or kept plain	Water or usual drink
Microwave rice	Tolerated fish, meat, beans or alternative	Sauce separate	Squash or water
Crackers	Cheese or tolerated alternative	Same brand and predictable crunch	Tea or usual drink
Cereal	Tolerated milk or yoghurt	Known bowl and portion	Additional drink if wanted
Potato	Simple filling	Plain, smooth or crisp as preferred	Usual drink

When the formula is still too much

Remove a decision. Keep a written list of three “automatic meals”. Store the components together where safe. Use the same bowl or plate. Ask another person to offer only two choices or bring the agreed default. If preparing the food is impossible, ready-made and pre-portioned food may be the accessible option. Convenience is a tool, not a moral category.

Build your own automatic meals

Choose combinations you already know are tolerable. Do not use this worksheet to pressure yourself into new foods during a difficult moment.

Meal	Energy food	Sustaining food	Familiar element	Drink
Automatic meal 1	_____	_____	_____	_____
Automatic meal 2	_____	_____	_____	_____
Automatic meal 3	_____	_____	_____	_____

My emergency version

The one food I can often manage: _____

The drink I want kept available: _____

The person who can help: _____

What I want them to do: _____

What makes eating harder: _____

Support without pressure

Helpful support may include buying the exact product, sitting nearby, preparing food without commenting on quantity, keeping components separate or offering the agreed default. Avoid surprise substitutions, disguising ingredients, arguing about nutrition or turning each bite into a negotiation. Safety and trust are part of nourishment.

When to seek more help

Speak with a GP or healthcare professional if food variety or quantity is reducing, weight is changing unintentionally, eating is causing significant fear, or there are signs of dehydration, faintness, weakness or nutritional deficiency. People with ARFID or an eating disorder deserve assessment that considers physical health, sensory needs and psychological wellbeing. Seek urgent help through NHS 111, A&E; or 999 when symptoms suggest immediate physical risk.

The no-thinking shopping cheat sheet

The aim is not to stock a perfect kitchen. It is to keep enough familiar building blocks available that one combination remains possible. Choose only foods that are safe and appropriate for you, then keep this list visible or photograph it for shopping.

Keep available	My usual choices	Restocking cue
Two energy foods	_____	Add to list when one backup remains.
Two sustaining foods	_____	Check fridge or freezer on an agreed day.
Two familiar flavours	_____	Photograph the exact brand and size.
Two drinks	_____	Keep one unopened reserve where practical.
One emergency option	_____	Replace immediately after it is used.

When the formula does not work

What happened	Try this
Every choice feels wrong	Stop combining. Choose one safe food or drink and reduce sensory input.
The meal feels too large	Serve a smaller visible portion and keep more available without pressure.
Mixed textures are the problem	Place components in separate dishes and allow them to be eaten individually.
Preparation has stalled	Name only the next physical action or ask someone to prepare the agreed default.
The usual brand is unavailable	Do not force a substitute during a difficult moment. Use another known safe option if possible.
Nothing has been eaten for a long time	Use the easiest tolerated food or drink and seek appropriate help if this is recurring or you feel unwell.

What helped me eat tracker

Date and time: _____ **My capacity:** very low / low / moderate / more available

What I chose: _____

What made it manageable: _____

Sensory details that helped: _____

What I want to repeat or prepare for next time: _____

Use the tracker to discover helpful patterns, not to judge portions or demand variety. It may reveal that a certain bowl, temperature, time of day, brand, level of company or preparation method makes eating more reachable.

A message from Maggie

I know that food can look simple from the outside while feeling enormously complicated on the inside. If you can only manage the same familiar choice again, that is not a failure. Familiarity may be what makes nourishment possible today.

Begin with the food your body and nervous system can accept. Let the formula reduce decisions rather than create new pressure. Some days you may use every part; other days you may only manage a drink or one safe food. You still deserve kindness, practical support and care that listens to the reasons eating is difficult.

Sources and books

NHS Eatwell Guide. General guidance on food groups and balance across a day or week.

nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/the-eatwell-guide/

NHS Eating a balanced diet. General population information; people with medical or special dietary needs are advised to seek individual guidance.

nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/how-to-eat-a-balanced-diet/eating-a-balanced-diet/

NICE NG69. Eating disorders recognition and treatment.

nice.org.uk/guidance/ng69

The Autistic Adult's Guide to Nourishing Yourself by Kendra Little - reducing practical and sensory barriers to eating.

How to Keep House While Drowning by KC Davis - shame-free approaches to care tasks.

Just Eat It by Laura Thomas - discussion of diet culture and a more flexible relationship with food.

Clinical note

This resource is general education, not a nutritionally complete prescription. Individual needs vary with age, health, activity, allergies, intolerances, pregnancy, swallowing safety, medication and prescribed diets. A registered dietitian or relevant clinician can help adapt the formula safely.

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