

Managing ADHD with Nutrition

What is helpful and practical?

Opinions about managing attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) by adding or eliminating foods or supplements are everywhere. It can be difficult to know what to try or what to believe. Although this handout was created based on research in children, the information may help adolescents and adults with ADHD as well. Here are some tips to help you get started.

Don't believe what you have heard about sugar

We've all heard that sugar makes kids hyper. Most studies have not proven this. It is a good idea to limit sugar because too much sugar is unhealthy. Completely avoiding sugar won't cure ADHD.

Watch out for vitamins and supplements

There is a lot of information about vitamins and supplements. Talk to your child's healthcare provider before giving any vitamins or supplements to your child. Some may be harmful or may cost you money without having any benefit.

Iron

Some children with ADHD have been found to have low iron in their blood. It isn't clear why, but your child's healthcare provider may want to do a simple blood test to check for low iron. Never give your child iron supplements unless you are told to do so by your child's healthcare provider.

Zinc

A few studies suggest that low zinc levels in children with ADHD result in more inattention. However it is too soon to recommend zinc supplements. Also zinc can interact with some of the stimulant medications your child may be taking.

Megavitamins

One study of megavitamins found this therapy to be unhelpful and caused increases in blood levels that may indicate harm to the liver. Do not use megavitamins until more research can be done.

Omega-3 and -6 Fatty Acid Supplements

One study called the Oxford-Durham study looked at using these dietary supplements in 117 children, about 38 of which had symptoms of ADHD.



The children experienced benefits in reading and spelling but not in coordination. There were no side effects. Other studies have found mixed results. Although there may be a benefit, there isn't enough research to know if these supplements are a good idea. If you are going to try supplements, the recommended dose is 300 to 600 mg/day of omega-3 and 30 to 60 mg/day of omega-6, continued for 2 or 3 months, or longer if indicated by your child's healthcare provider. You will need to read the supplement labels carefully as each brand will have a different dose.

Eliminate Additives and Preservatives

An additive and salicylate-free diet (known as the Feingold diet) may be especially helpful for children with sensitivities to food dyes and preservatives. This diet requires eliminating foods such as deli meats, sausage, hot dogs, and drinks or other foods containing artificial flavors and coloring agents. Stay away from red and orange dyes and preservatives, especially butylated hydroxytoluene and butylated hydroxyanisole. Strictly following this diet may be difficult but may be helpful for some families.

Eliminate Foods that might be Allergenic

An oligoantigenic diet (also called Hypoallergenic or Elimination diet) diet involves removing certain foods from your child's diet that they may be sensitive to. Following this diet may require help from a dietician or nutrition expert.

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Try a plan that works for the whole family

It will be a lot easier to make a permanent change to your grocery shopping and meals if you have an eating plan that works for the whole family – adults too!

“ADHD-associated” Foods to Avoid

- Fast Foods
- Red Meat
- Processed Meats
- Potato Chips and similar snack foods
- High-fat dairy products
- Soft drinks or soda

“Healthy” Foods: Preferred

- Fish
- Vegetables
- Tomato
- Fresh Fruits
- Whole grains
- Low-fat dairy products



In the grocery store:

-Shop around the edges of the store, rather than in the middle aisles. This is usually where you will find the healthiest foods.

-Look at the ingredients on the nutrition label. If the list is long or you can't pronounce what's on the list, chances are it isn't healthy.

At home:

-Make small changes over time. Set a goal of one new change every week.

-Avoid fast food restaurants. If you are in a rush, a healthy sandwich or wrap that you make at home will be better for your family and save money.

Get the Facts from the Right Places

Be very careful about what you read online. Sometimes websites are just trying to sell you something. Talk to your child's healthcare provider about any nutrition or diets you want to try.

*Most of the information in this handout came from a 2012 article in the journal, *Pediatrics* (Millichap JG, Yee MM. The diet factor in attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. *Pediatrics*. Feb 2012;129(2):330-337.).

The bottom line

Strategy or idea	Should you consider it?
Avoid sugar	It's a good idea for everyone to eat sugar in moderation. Completely avoiding sugar won't help your child's ADHD.
Iron	Only if your child's blood test shows low iron.
Zinc	Only if your child's blood test shows low zinc.
Megavitamins	No. At least one study shows megavitamins may be harmful.
Omega-3 and -6 Fatty Acid Supplements	Maybe. Talk to your child's healthcare provider first.
Avoiding additives and preservatives	Yes. However strictly following this may not be practical for every family.
Elimination diets	Probably not. These diets may be helpful but are difficult to follow. Working with a dietician or nutrition expert might help.
“Healthy” Foods	Absolutely! Avoiding ADHD-associated foods and eating “healthy” foods can help the whole family. Work on small changes over time.

Trustworthy Websites about ADHD

- American Academy of Pediatrics: <http://www.healthychildren.org> Click on “Health Issues” and then “ADHD”
- American Academy of Family Physicians: <http://familydoctor.org> Click on “Diseases and Conditions” then “A” under “Browse by Name.” Scroll to the bottom of the page and click ADHD
- Vermont Department of Health <http://healthvermont.gov/family/ADHD/ADHD.aspx>

Books about ADHD

- *ADHD: What Every Parent Needs to Know* by the American Academy of Pediatrics.
- *Delivered from Distraction* by Edward Hallowell and John Ratey.
- *More Attention, Less Deficit: Success Strategies for Adults with ADHD* by Ari Tuckman.