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.

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.

The bottom line

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

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.

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
- Delivered from Distraction by Edward Hallowell and John Ratey.
- More Attention, Less Deficit: Success Strategies for Adults with ADHD by Ari Tuckman.


This handout may be freely downloaded from The Vermont Academic Detailing Program website www.vtad.org
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