Dietary Considerations for Children with ADHD

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Overview

- Nutrition concerns for children with ADHD
- Popular diet interventions and supplements
- Concerning food ingredients
- What changes can families make?
Common Parent Concerns

- Picky Eating
- Lack of Appetite
- Weight Gain (too much or too little)
- Children like routines
- Medications affect appetite – can make children lose their appetite. When meds wear off children are often very hungry.
Practitioner concerns

- Overweight/underweight
- Abnormal lab values
- Medication side effects
Feingold Diet

- Popularized in the 1970's
- Elimination diet – removes artificial dyes, artificial flavorings, some preservatives, artificial sweeteners, foods containing salicylates (a number of fruits, veggies, nuts)
- Originally designed to treat asthma
- Found to be largely ineffective at treating ADHD symptoms
- Difficult to follow, very restrictive
- More beneficial when combined with removal of other foods that may be bothersome to a child (ex: chocolate, sugar, caffeine)
Medical Foods

- Diet is intended to target a specific behavior or medical condition
- Specific diet consumed and administered with physician supervision
  - Not necessarily food – the diet is created from “food-based elements”
    - May be a pill or formula
  - Advertised as pharmaceutical grade
- FDA does not approve or regulate medical foods
- Can be expensive, not covered by insurance
- Some people may benefit
- Not enough evidence to support this approach
There is no substitution for or natural alternative to traditional ADHD medications.

Supplementing with individual vitamins and minerals can be harmful. Do not supplement unless blood levels have been tested and a doctor has recommended it.

Natural supplements are not regulated.

Most common micronutrients deficiencies can be corrected with diet.

No evidence that fixing vitamin and mineral deficiencies will impact ADHD symptoms.
Some kids with (and without) ADHD are deficient in omega-3 fatty acids and heart-healthy plant oils (omega-6).

Some research shows that ADHD symptoms improve after taking an omega supplement.

- Fatty acid supplements can cause GI distress
- Kids need to be tested for a deficiency before supplementing
- Adding 2 weekly servings of fatty fish and heart healthy plant fats to a child’s diet should provide adequate omega fatty acids
What Are Omega-3 Fatty Acids?

- EPA and DHA

- EPA – fish, fish oils, marine sources

- DHA – eggs (especially enriched eggs), anchovies, salmon, herring, mackerel, tuna, halibut, various DHA fortified foods.
  - Flaxseed oil is a precursor to DHA

- Supplements may not be totally safe
- Offering foods that contain EPA and DHA is quite safe
Gluten Free?

- GF foods are designed for individuals who have an allergy or sensitivity to gluten. Most people are not allergic to gluten.

- Kids with ADHD do not benefit from eating gluten free foods.
Sugar

- Villainized as the cause of bad behavior
- Occasional instances of children showing true sugar intolerance
- Research shows that it doesn’t directly affect behavior

- **However**, diets high in sugar are often low in vital nutrients
  - Lots of added sugars in foods and drinks marketed to children
Food Additives

- More than 10,000 food additives allowed in the US
  - Modify taste, texture, nutrients, appearance
  - Generally Recognized as Safe – doesn’t require USDA approval

- Buy and serve more fresh and frozen produce
- Fewer processed meats
- Avoid microwaving in plastic
- Use glass or stainless steel containers when possible
Food Dyes

- Artificial food dyes can affect behavior and ADHD symptoms
- Dyes are added to many foods advertised to children
  - Blueberry muffins, breakfast cereals, snack cakes, pop tarts, Cheetos, M&M’s, gummies, kool aid and other fruit flavored drinks
  - Often added to make it look like real fruit instead of chemicals
- Many food dyes have been banned in Europe
- Big 3 food dyes: Red 40, Yellow 5, Yellow 6
What might a typical child’s diet look like?

Breakfast – sugary cereals, pastries, processed breakfast meats, juice drinks

Lunch – Lunchables, chips, cookies, sweetened/colored applesauce, flavored milk, juice drinks

Snacks – chips, cookies, candies, snack cakes, processed meats, soda, juice drinks

Dinner – fast food, large portions of meat, large portions of refined starches, vegetables with pre-packaged sauce, ketchup, BBQ sauce…

Dessert?
How can we change what kids are eating

- Read food labels
- Cut out extra sugars and food dyes
- Limit foods with long ingredient lists or words you can’t pronounce
- **Offer fruits and/or vegetables with every meal**
- Provide fish 1-2x/week
- Add nuts, seeds, whole grains
- Drink more water
  - Limit soda, juice, flavored milk, lemonade, etc.
- Practice cooking together as a family
Establish a meal routine

- Meals and snacks offered at the same time every day
- Make breakfast count if meds interfere with appetite
- Clear expectations
  - Be consistent!
- Ensure that more of the healthy options are available
I’m not ready to change everything. What should I cut back on?

- Fast food
- High fat red meat
- Processed meats
- Potato chips
- Packaged snack foods
- Soft drinks
Family centered change

- Families who make changes together are more successful
- Less pressure and isolation for a child
- Asking children to change on their own is not age appropriate
- Kids know where you hide the junk food
- Promotes long term lifestyle change
- Everyone benefits!!!
Summary

- Diet can’t correct ADHD, but some changes may affect behavior
- Elimination diets are for children with food allergies
- Supplements may not be safe, always check with physician
- Adding omega-3’s and heart healthy plant fats to the diet may provide a benefit
- Sugar is not the cause of hyperactivity, but diets high in sugar are often low in important nutrients
- Avoid food dyes and overly-processed foods
- Provide whole foods whenever possible – fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, lean meats
- Make changes the whole family can do together
Questions?


