Can the right diet help my child with ADHD?

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In this short article, I will address the question, can what you eat help with the symptoms of ADHD? Principally, attentional dysregulation and physical hyperactivity. ADHD is not caused by diet or nutritional problems, but certain foods can affect the symptoms of ADHD.

We would recommend that parents and carers consider the overall nutrition in their child's diet, if it would help to add supplements to the diet and if there are any foods or ingredients that might be triggering certain unwanted responses that could be reduced or even eliminated. It is important to do this as research has shown that general health, food and nutrition can make a significant difference in the lives of children and teenagers with ADHD.

As a general rule, any foods that are good for the brain are likely to be good for a child with ADHD. Within an overall balanced diet, foods which are a good source of protein, for example, fish, eggs, beans, nuts, soy, low-fat dairy products, cheese, eggs, or vegetable-based alternatives to meat. If your child is having difficulties with sleep and is tired during the day, then protein-based foods provide the body with fuel. Protein takes longer than carbohydrates to break down in the body, providing a longer-lasting energy source. Not consuming enough protein during the day can be a primary reason for fatigue. If your child is very active and always "on the go", they will need lots of fuel through the day.

A protein rich diet will also help to boost your child's metabolism and increase the number of calories they burn. In one study, a group of teenagers given a high protein diet burned 260 more calories per day than a group of similar aged teenagers who were given a low protein diet. That is the equivalent to an hour of moderate-intensity exercise per day. Nuts are a good source of protein and good for breakfast or after school snacks. Protein rich foods also help the brain to make neurotransmitters. Therefore, a protein based breakfast will set your child up for the school day ahead and can prevent the surges in blood sugar levels which can exacerbate hyperactivity.

Carbohydrates are also a significant source of energy, important for providing fuel to the brain, kidneys, heart muscles, and nervous system. Fibre is a carbohydrate that aids in digestion. This will help your child to feel full and keep their blood cholesterol levels in check. Therefore, foods such as vegetables and some fruits, including oranges, tangerines, pears, grapefruit, apples and kiwi. Eating these types of food in the evening may also help sleep. However, be careful with certain processed carbohydrates. In my opinion, one very important consideration for your child's diet is to reduce the amount of sugar and certain processed carbohydrates consumed each day, for example, white bread or waffles. These are almost the same as eating sugar. The body digests these processed carbohydrates into glucose (sugar) so quickly that the effect is virtually the same as eating sugar from a spoon.

There have been many studies into the effect of Omega 3 fatty acids on aspects of the symptomology of ADHD. Omega-3s are essential fats important for normal brain function. They are called "essential" fats because the body must get them from foods consumed; our bodies cannot make them. Research suggests that children with ADHD have lower blood levels of omega-3's than those without ADHD. Good sources of Omega 3 fatty acids are fish and other seafood, for example, salmon, mackerel, tuna, herring or sardines. Nuts and seeds, for example, flaxseed, chia seeds and walnuts and plant oils such as flaxseed oil, soybean oil, and canola oil. If your child is reluctant to eat oily fish or has a nut allergy, then are supplements available. Go to **www.equazen.co.uk** for more information on this.

Similarly, studies into the importance of iron, zinc and magnesium in the diets of children with ADHD have stressed their impact upon brain development and functioning. In terms of poor attentional regulation, iron deficiency has been found to impact upon dopamine receptors and may influence dopamine dependent functions in the brain. Foods that are rich in iron include red meat, beans such as red kidney beans and chickpeas and nuts and dried fruit, such as dried apricots. Good sources of Zinc include meat, shellfish, chickpeas, lentils, beans, nuts, dairy, eggs and whole grains. Foods that are rich in magnesium are fish, spinach, jacket potatoes, bran cereals, toasted wheat germs, soy, cheese, yogurt, cooked beans, tofu, almonds, cashews and peanut butter.

Now let us consider additives, artificial flavours, colours and preservatives. Although there is currently controversy about exactly how harmful these are for children with ADHD, the European Union requires a warning label on food packaging that contains additives that reads, "This food may have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children." Therefore, a good idea to assess how many additives are in the foods you are buying is to read food ingredient labels and opt for foods that are additive-free. In most cases, fresh, unprocessed foods are the best. Most popular foods that children and young people like to eat have brands which are additive free, such as bread, cereal, cookies and pizza.

I hope that this short introduction to healthy foods for children with ADHD has provided you with some ideas for food types and ingredients to include in your child's diet.

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