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The ADHD Diet: What to Eat, What to Avoid

Poor eating habits don't cause attention deficit, but research suggests a strong relationship between ADHD and the food you consume. Find out what foods and supplements make a diet ADD-friendly — and what may make ADHD symptoms worse.

by ADDitude Editors

Deficiencies in certain types of foods can worsen ADHD symptoms in children and adults. An ADHD diet that ensures you're getting adequate levels of the right foods optimizes brain function.

Protein. Foods rich in protein — lean beef, pork, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, nuts, soy, and low-fat dairy products — can have beneficial effects on ADD symptoms. Protein-rich foods are used by the body to make neurotransmitters, the chemicals released by brain cells to communicate with each other. Protein can prevent surges in blood sugar, which increase hyperactivity.

“Because the body makes brain-awakening neurotransmitters when you eat protein, start your day with a breakfast that includes it,” says Laura Stevens, M.S., a nutritionist at Purdue University and author of *12 Effective Ways to Help Your ADD/ADHD Child*. “Don’t stop there. Look for ways to slip in lean protein during the day, as well.”

Try: thinkThin protein bars, Larabars, Raw Revolution bars, or Berry Blendz fruit smoothies.

Supercharge Your Brain with ADHD-Friendly Vitamins and Minerals

Balanced Meals. Faye Berger Mitchell, a registered dietician from Bethesda, Maryland, has a nine-year-old daughter who received an ADHD diagnosis two years ago. While her daughter takes stimulants to control her ADHD symptoms, Mitchell concluded that a pill is not enough. She finds that when her daughter eats a well-balanced diet, including vegetables, complex carbohydrates, fruits, and plenty of protein, her behavior tends to be more consistently under control.

Ned Hallowell, M.D., founder of the Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health, in Sudbury, Massachusetts, and New York City, advises all of his ADHD patients to think about their plates when preparing a meal. Half of the plate, he recommends, should be filled with fruits or vegetables, one-fourth with a protein, and one-fourth with carbohydrates.

Hallowell also advocates eating several servings of whole grains, which are rich in fiber, each day to prevent blood sugar levels from spiking and then plummeting.

Next: Brain-Boosting Supplements

FREE EXPERT WEBINAR
What's Eating Your Child?

Kelly Dorfman, MS, LND, explains how foods play a key role in ADHD. Listen to the audio now!

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Brain-Boosting Supplements

“Many diets are deficient in key vitamins, minerals, and fats that may improve attention and alertness,” says

Richard Brown, M.D., author of *How to Use Herbs, Nutrients, and Yoga in Mental Health Care*. He suggests that children and adults who have been diagnosed with ADHD be tested for nutritional deficiencies.

“Supplements and diet can correct nutrient shortfalls that exacerbate ADHD symptoms,” adds Brown.

Zinc, Iron, and Magnesium. Zinc regulates the neurotransmitter dopamine and may make methylphenidate more effective by improving the brain’s response to dopamine. Low levels of this mineral correlate with inattention. Iron is also necessary for making dopamine. One small study showed ferritin levels (a measure of iron stores) to be low in 84 percent of ADHD children compared to 18 percent of the control group. Low iron levels correlate with cognitive deficits and severe ADHD. Like zinc, magnesium is used to make neurotransmitters involved in attention and concentration, and it has a calming effect on the brain.

All three minerals are found in lean meats, poultry, seafood, nuts, soy, and fortified cereals. While diet is the safest way to increase all three mineral levels, a multivitamin/multimineral with iron will ensure that you or your child gets the daily reference value (DRV) of these minerals.

B Vitamins. Studies suggest that giving children who have low levels of B vitamins a supplement improved some IQ scores (by 16 points) and reduced aggression and antisocial behavior. “Vitamin B-6 seems to increase the brain’s levels of dopamine, which improves alertness,” says Brown.

Quick AND Healthy?? Dinner Recipes for ADHD Families

Try: Bio-Strath, a Swiss formula, available in pill and liquid forms at vitacost.com, was used in many studies on vitamin B and ADD. Drugstore chains also offer inexpensive, high-quality, store-brand B-vitamin formulations.

Multivitamin/Multimineral. If your child is a picky eater, or if he eats lots of take-out food, chips, and soda, he probably isn’t getting the daily recommended value of vitamins and minerals. A daily multivitamin/multimineral will ensure that he does, no matter how finicky he is.

Try: Hero Yummi Bears Multi-Vitamin + Minerals. They contain no artificial colors and flavors, which increase hyperactivity in some children with ADHD.

Picamilon. A combination of the B-vitamin niacin and gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), picamilon improves blood flow to the brain and has mild stimulative effects, improving alertness and attention. It can also reduce aggressive behavior. “Both adults and children derive benefits from this supplement,” says Brown.

Try: Picamilon can be purchased at Smart Nutrition and IAS.

Next: Fish Oil for Brain Function

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In-depth research and tips about non-medical ADHD treatments such as behavior therapy, working-memory treatment, and omega-3 fatty acids.

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Fish Oil for Brain Function

© Nola Lopez **Omega-3 Fatty Acids.** Omega-3s are believed to be important in brain and nerve cell function. A new study, conducted at Göteborg University, in Sweden, concluded that daily doses of omega-3s -- found in cold-water, fatty fish, such as sardines, tuna, and salmon -- reduced ADHD symptoms by 50 percent. Dr. Sven Ostlund followed a group of ADHD children aged 8-18 who took fish oil daily. Within six months, there was a noticeable decrease in ADHD symptoms in 25 percent of the children.

Another study showed that omega-3s tend to break down more readily in the bodies of patients with ADHD than in those without the condition. “ADDers who have low blood levels of omega-3s will show the biggest

improvement in mental focus and cognitive function,” says Brown. “Sometimes the change is dramatic.”

John Ratey, M.D., associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, recommends that you choose a supplement that contains more EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) than DHA (docosahexaenoic acid).

Try: OmegaBrite, Omega Rx, MorEPA, or Nordic Naturals pills; Clicks Bar; or Barlean's Omega Swirl drink

Next: Stimulating Herbs

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Fish Oil 101

An overview of one of the main alternative treatments for ADHD. Download now!

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Stimulating Herbs

© Nola Lopez “Herbs may improve blood flow to the brain, increasing alertness while reducing aggressive behavior,” Brown says. Talk with your doctor, or a psycho-pharmacologist, before starting an herb regimen.

Ginkgo and Ginseng. “These herbs are cognitive activators,” says Brown. They act like stimulants, without the side effects of ADHD medication. Typically, adults and children who take ginkgo and ginseng improve on ADHD rating scales, and are less impulsive and distractible. Asian ginseng may overstimulate younger children. If this happens, switch to American ginseng.

Try: Hsu’s Ginseng is a reliable mail-order source for American and Asian versions of the herb. According to Brown, Ginkoba and Ginkgold are the best brands of ginkgo.

Pycnogenol. An extract made from French maritime pine bark, pycnogenol was found to improve hyperactivity and sharpen attention, concentration, and visual-motor coordination in students after one month, based on standardized measures and teacher and parent ratings. The herb is also rich in polyphenols, antioxidants that protect brain cells from free radical damage. “The first double-blind study on the herb was published in 2006, confirming its benefit,” says Brown. “Larger randomized trials, though, are needed.”

Try: Purchase pycnogenol from Nature’s Best.

Rhodiola Rosea. Made from a plant of the same name that grows in the Arctic, this herb can improve alertness, attention, and accuracy. It can be too stimulating for young children, and is occasionally beneficial in children ages eight to 12. It is most useful, says Brown, for students in junior high, high school, and college, who have to complete long papers and spend hours reading.

Try: Rhodiola rosea is available from Ameriden International, Swedish Herbal Institute-ProActive, and GNC.

Next: Foods to Avoid

FREE ADHD EXPERTS PODCAST

No More Side Effects!

Dr. Dodson explains how to minimize common side effects of ADHD medications. Listen to the audio now!

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Foods to Avoid

High-Sugar Foods and Snacks. Several studies suggest that some ADHD kids are “turned on” by copious amounts of sugar. One study concluded that the more sugar hyperactive children consumed, the more destructive and restless they became. A study conducted at Yale University indicates that high-sugar diets increase inattention in some kids.

Some common items to avoid include fruit “drinks” or “cocktails,” both of which are higher in sugar than 100 percent fruit juice. Read food labels carefully, looking for the following ingredients (code words for sugar): high-fructose corn sweetener, dehydrated cane juice; dextrin; dextrose; maltodextrin; sucrose; molasses; and malt syrup.

Artificial Dyes and Preservatives. Studies published in *The Lancet*, *Pediatrics*, and *The Journal of Pediatrics* suggest that some children with ADHD are adversely affected by food additives. A recent study indicates that artificial food coloring and flavors, as well as the preservative sodium benzoate, make some non-ADHD kids hyperactive.

Avoid colorful cereals, like Fruit Loops and Lucky Charms. Cheerios are better, and lower in sugar. Substitute 100 percent fruit juice for soft drinks and fruit punches, most of which are artificially colored and flavored. If your child wants a treat, offer him Pepperidge Farm Chessmen cookies, which are free of dyes and low in sugar.

Foods That Cause Allergies. According to studies, gluten, wheat, corn, and soy cause some children to lose focus and become more hyperactive. Vincent Monastra, Ph.D., author of *Parenting Children with ADHD*, suggests that all children be screened for food allergies before being prescribed medication for ADHD. Talk with your doctor about testing for allergies.

More on ADHD, Diet, and Nutrition:

Your ADHD Diet: The Truth About Sugar, Protein, and Feingold

Smart, Healthy Snacks for the ADHD Brain

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Without how, food plays a key role in attention deficit. Listen to the audio now!
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