

5 Foods to Avoid if Your Child Has ADHD

Certain foods can make your child's ADHD symptoms worse. Here's what you need to know to create a better ADHD diet.



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Medically Reviewed by Lee S. Cohen, MD (/authors/lee-s-cohen/) Updated on December 5, 2023

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For years, doctors have speculated that certain foods may have something to do with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/adhd/guide/>), or ADHD. Much research has been done on the subject of a helpful diet for ADHD, but according to the Mayo Clinic (<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/adhd/symptoms-causes/syc-20350889>), experts don't believe that foods actually cause ADHD. What some foods seem to do, however, is worsen ADHD symptoms or cause behavior that mimics the signs of ADHD in children.

Some evidence suggests that children with ADHD may have low levels of essential fatty acids. However, early studies have not consistently concluded that supplementation of omega-3 fatty acids in the diets of children with ADHD (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition/what-are-the-benefits-of-fish-oil-for-adhd/>) will improve behavior. Omega-3 fatty acids affect the transmissions of some neurotransmitters (brain chemicals). While a balance of omega-3 fatty acids and omega-6 fatty acids is best for overall health, the typical American diet contains too few omega-3s. Some research shows that ADHD and omega-3 deficiency share two symptoms:

- 1 Excessive thirst
- 2 Increased need to urinate

More research is needed in this area. The general dietary recommendations for children (<https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article-abstract/117/2/544/68440/Dietary-Recommendations-for-Children-and>) are to include fruits and vegetables, whole grains, bean, lean meat, and fish. Ask your ADHD dietitian about the best type of fish for ADHD.

Many parents wonder if artificial food additives and colorings contribute to ADHD. Though the causes of ADHD are still unknown, you can try removing the sources of artificial colorings and food additives, including sugar-sweetened drinks, candy, and colorful cereals, and determine if your child's behavior improves. Eliminate processed food products, and instead provide a wholesome diet of fresh, healthy foods to optimize the health and well-being of your child.

Scientists have also looked at whether sugar can impact ADHD symptoms, but study findings have been mixed. For instance, one study (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8800296/>) showed that high sugar intake is more common among kids with ADHD, but another study (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6193136/>) showed no link between sucrose (a common sweetener) and ADHD symptoms among kids ages 6 to 11. More research on the relationship between sugar and ADHD is still needed.

Be aware that megadoses of vitamins and minerals — especially vitamins A, D, E, and K, according to Colorado State University (<https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/nutrition-food-safety-health/fat-soluble-vitamins-a-d-e-and-k-9-315/>) — can be toxic to a child and can interact with ADHD pills. To date, there is little consistent evidence that ADHD can be treated with nutritional supplements. Again, aim for a balanced diet that includes a variety of fresh, whole foods.

What about caffeine and ADHD? Excessive caffeine and excessive consumption of fast foods and other foods of poor nutritional value can cause kids to display behavior that might be confused with ADHD, according to Frank Barnhill, MD, an expert on ADHD and the author of *Mistaken for ADHD*.

To learn more about a diet for ADHD, talk with your child's doctor about the pros and cons of trying a diet that eliminates food additives to see if it makes a difference in your child's behavior. Make sure your doctor or an ADHD dietitian helps supervise the diet plan. A diet that eliminates too many foods can be unhealthy because it may lack necessary vitamins and nutrients.

Read on for a list of foods that may be linked with ADHD symptoms.

1 Soda Can Worsen ADHD Symptoms

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If you have ADHD, consider eliminating soda (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/photogallery/soda-alternatives.aspx>). These drinks contain ingredients that may worsen ADHD symptoms, such as high-fructose corn syrup (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/high-fructose-corn-syrup/guide/>) and caffeine. "Excessive sugar and caffeine intake both cause symptoms of hyperactivity and easy distractibility," says Dr. Barnhill. One study (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4083697/>) found that, in general, 5-year-old children who drank sodas were more likely to show aggression and social withdrawal.

2 Frozen Fruits and Vegetables May Exacerbate ADHD Symptoms

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Fresh fruits and vegetables are important for any child's diet, and for kids with ADHD in particular, they may have the added benefit of helping relieve ADHD symptoms. Research (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35535573/>) shows that kids with ADHD who eat more fruits and vegetables are more likely to have less severe symptoms like inattention.

Although fruits and vegetables are healthy choices for an ADHD diet (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/adhd-pictures/healthy-snacks-for-kids-with-adhd.aspx#/slide-1>), some frozen brands contain artificial colors, so check all labels carefully. Barnhill says some frozen foods can exacerbate ADHD symptoms for another reason: "Foods treated with organophosphates for insect control have been shown to cause neurologic-based behavioral problems that mimic ADHD and many other behavior problems."

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ADHD medication can dampen hunger, leading to mood swings in children. These healthy snacks are simple, efficient and delicious.

3 Energy Drinks Can Bring On ADHD Symptoms



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Energy drinks (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition/how-bad-are-energy-drinks-for-you-really/>) are becoming increasingly popular among kids, especially teens. Unfortunately, they also have a veritable treasure trove of ingredients that can worsen ADHD symptoms: sugar, artificial sweeteners, artificial colors, caffeine (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/rheumatoid-arthritis/diet/is-caffeine-ok-with-ra/>), and other stimulants. “Energy drinks are high on the list of things that cause teens to display behaviors mimicking ADHD,” says Barnhill. They have no place in a healthy ADHD diet.

The high amounts of caffeine can be particularly unsafe for kids and teens taking certain ADHD medications. One reason: Stimulant medications may cause a slightly increased heart rate, according to the Attention Deficit Disorder Association (<https://add.org/adhd-and-caffeine/>). Combining medications like these with caffeinated drinks — which may also affect heart rate — can harm their health.

4 Fish and Other Seafood Can Make ADHD Symptoms More Severe



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Eating fish and other seafood with trace amounts of mercury can exacerbate ADHD symptoms in the long term, says Naheed Ali, MD, PhD, an expert on ADHD and the author of *Diabetes and You: A Comprehensive, Holistic Approach* (https://www.amazon.com/Diabetes-You-Comprehensive-Holistic-Approach/dp/1442207299/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1515606961&sr=8-1&keywords=Diabetes+and+You%3A+A+Comprehensive%2C+Holistic+Approach). Some of the worst culprits are shark, king mackerel, swordfish, and tilefish.

"Mercury, like cellulose, is extremely hard to digest and can accumulate in the brain over time," explains Dr. Ali. "This can lead to hyperactivity." Talk to your doctor or ADHD nutritionist about the best types of fish (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/heart-health/diet/eat-right-fish-heart-health/>) to include in an ADHD diet.

5 Food Sensitivities Can Cause ADHD Symptoms



Many children with food sensitivities can exhibit ADHD symptoms after they are exposed to certain foods. Some of the common foods that can cause ADHD reactions include milk, chocolate, soy, wheat, eggs, beans, corn, tomatoes, grapes (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition/diet/grapes-benefits-risks-types-how-grow-more/>), and oranges. If you suspect a food sensitivity may be contributing to your child’s ADHD symptoms, talk to your ADHD dietitian or doctor about trying an elimination diet (<https://www.everydayhealth.com/adhd/whats-the-deal-with-elimination-diets-for-adhd/>).

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