

ADHD and diet

Information for parents, families and carers about diet in children and young people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Diet can not cause ADHD, nor can it cure it. However some changes in your child's diet can affect their behaviour.

Healthy eating is important in your child's development. There are five food groups that a balanced diet is based on. These are covered in this leaflet.

The five groups are:

- carbohydrates
- fats and sugars
- fruit and vegetable
- protein
- dairy foods

Information on food additives is also included.

Carbohydrates

These foods should make up a third of a child's diet and given at each meal. There are two types of carbohydrates: complex carbohydrates and simple carbohydrates.

Complex carbohydrates break down slowly in your child's gut and release energy slowly. These include whole grain bread, wholegrain rice, wholegrain pasta or potatoes with skin on. Most of your child's carbohydrates should be from this group. They are high in fibre and can help a child's bowel habit.

Simple carbohydrates are broken down quickly by your child's gut and can give your child a boost of energy then a drop, which may affect attention span, memory and behaviour. These include, sweets, biscuits and fizzy drinks.

Fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetables are:

- low in fat
- high in fibre
- provide essential vitamins and minerals

Your child should aim to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables each day, which can be:

- juice
- fresh
- tinned
- frozen
- dried

Fruit and vegetables are needed for development and growth, including development of your child's brain.

Protein (meat, fish, eggs and bBeans)

This group of food provides your child with protein which is essential for growth and development

Fish

Oily fish can be high in fatty acid, omega-3. There is some research to show that omega-3 can help reduce behavioural problem and promote brain function, as well as help keep your child's heart healthy. Foods high in omega-3 include fish such as:

- herring
- pilchards
- rainbow trout
- mackerel
- kippers
- trout
- sardine
- salmon
- fresh tuna (not tinned)

The NICE CG72 guidelines do not recommend dietary fatty acid supplements as a treatment for ADHD in children and young people. It is advisable that children need:

- 46g oily fish 18 months – 3 years
- 70g oily fish 4 – 6 years
- 93g oily fish 7-11 years

Dairy foods

Dairy foods contain essential nutrients, mainly calcium. You should aim for around 3 portions a day. Some research shows that a protein named casein, that is found in milk can increase symptoms of ADHD. The research is conflicting and if you feel that dairy foods affect your child's behaviour please ask for a

referral to a dietician. Dairy foods include milk, cheese and yogurt.

Foods high in fats and sugar

These foods include sweets, chocolate, cakes, biscuits, fried foods. It is important to limit these foods as they contain sugar which can have an adverse effect on, behaviour. When looking at food labels try and choose foods low in sugar and avoid foods high in fat, especially saturated and trans fat as these can cause heart problems. Try to avoid fatty meat, fried foods, cakes and biscuits and full fat products.

	Sugar	Fat
High/100g	>15g	>20g
Medium/100g	5-15g	3-20g
Low	<5g	<3g

Additives

Low sugar alternatives

Sweeteners used in the UK include aceslfame-k, aspartame, cyclamale and saccharin. These are good alternatives to sugar. They are regulated by the European Food Safety Authority. There is some research that shows high intake of these sweeteners can cause problems. Consult your dietician to have your child's diet reviewed.

E-numbers

E-numbers are artificial colours and preservatives in food that help to make it look and taste better.

Some additives that have been linked to increase hyperactivity in

some children include:

- E102 Tartazine (yellow)
- E110 sunset yellow (orange yellow)
- E122 Azorubine Carmosine (red)
- E133 Brilliant Blue (blue)
- E211 Sodium benzoate (preservatives)

If your child's behaviour deteriorates after consuming foods with colouring in it, consult your dietician if you want to remove these from your child's diet.

Caffeine

Caffeine is a stimulant that can be hidden in some foods and affect your child's behaviour. The response can be different for each child. Try de-cafeinated foods and drinks and avoid chocolate and fizzy drinks.

Fluid: your child needs to keep hydrated. Aim for 6-8 glasses of fluid a day. If your child finds it difficult, keep a litre bottle of water in the fridge so they can see how much they have drunk.

Top tips for meal times

- limit snacks and keep food high in fat and sugar out of reach
- structure meal times
- make a meal time table, so your child knows when it is meal and snack time
- have protected meal times with no other distractions.

Involve your child in food

- take your child to the supermarket and choose some new

foods

- add new foods at meal times
- let your child cook/bake and explore new foods
- use food cards or pictures to them choose new foods
- reward charts for eating all meals or specific foods.

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