

ADHD Diet and Nutrition: Foods to Eat and Foods to Avoid

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Can your dietary choices affect your attention, focus, or hyperactivity? There's no clear scientific evidence that attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is caused by diet or nutritional problems. But certain foods may play at least some role in affecting symptoms in a small group of people, research suggests.

So are there certain things you shouldn't eat if you have the condition? Or if your child has it, should you change what they eat?

Here are answers to questions about elimination diets, supplements, and foods that may ease symptoms of ADHD. But remember to check with your doctor to make sure these foods and diets don't affect your medicine or the way it's absorbed.

What Is an ADHD Diet?

An ADHD diet isn't one set of rules -- it looks different depending on your individual needs. It may include the foods you eat and any nutritional supplements you may take. Ideally, your eating habits would help your brain work better and lessen symptoms such as restlessness or lack of focus.

There are different ways to approach a diet to help ADHD symptoms:

- **Overall nutrition:** The assumption is that some foods you eat may make your symptoms better or worse. You might also not be eating some things that could help make symptoms better.
- **Supplementation diet:** With this plan, you add vitamins, minerals, or other nutrients. The idea is that it could help you make up for not getting enough of these through what you eat. Supporters of these diets think that if you don't get enough of certain nutrients, it may add to your symptoms.
- **Elimination diets:** These involve not eating foods or ingredients that you think might be triggering certain behaviors or making your symptoms worse.

Eat Nutritious Food

ADHD diets haven't been researched a lot. Data is limited, and results are mixed. Many health experts, however, think that what you eat and drink may help ease symptoms.

Experts say that whatever is good for the brain is likely to be good for ADHD. You may want to eat:

- **A high-protein diet.** Beans, cheese, eggs, meat, and nuts can be good sources of protein. Eat these kinds of foods in the morning and for after-school snacks. It may improve concentration and possibly make ADHD medications work longer.

- **More complex carbohydrates.** These are the good guys. Your body needs carbohydrates because it converts them into glucose to use for energy. Carbs are made up of chains of sugar molecules, and they are either simple or complex in structure. Load up on vegetables and some fruits, including oranges, tangerines, pears, grapefruits, apples, and kiwis. Eat this type of food in the evening, and it may help you sleep.
- **More omega-3 fatty acids.** You can find these in tuna, salmon, and other cold-water white fish. Walnuts, Brazil nuts, and olive and canola oils are other foods with omega-3 fatty acids. You could also take an omega-3 fatty acid supplement.

Foods to Avoid With ADHD

Some foods don't provide the best nutrients to support a healthy lifestyle. You may want to avoid the following if you have ADHD:

Sugary foods. Sugar adds calories, but not essential nutrients. It can also lead to health problems such as type 2 diabetes, obesity, and heart disease. According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, people aged 2 and older should limit sugars to less than 10% of their daily intake. For a 2,000-calorie diet, that means no more than 200 calories (about 12 teaspoons) may come from added sugars. Examples of sugary foods to avoid include:

- Drinks such as soda or concentrated fruit juices
- Sweets such as candy, cake, or cookies
- Processed foods (foods that come in a bag or box)

Simple carbs. Simple carbohydrates aren't all bad -- they appear in fruits, for example. But many simple carbs don't hold high nutritional value. Simple carbohydrates aren't as good as complex carbohydrates because they are quickly absorbed in your body, resulting in a spike in your blood sugar. Cut down on how many of these simple carbs you eat:

- Corn syrup
- Honey
- Sugar
- Products made from white flour
- White rice
- Potatoes without the skins

Unhealthy fats. Your body needs fat to help it absorb vitamins and support cell growth, but certain types of fat do more harm than good. Saturated fat, which is usually solid at room temperature, raises the levels of both good and bad cholesterol in the blood. High amounts of low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or “bad” cholesterol, can put you at risk for heart disease. The American Heart Association recommends keeping saturated fats between 5%-6% of your daily intake of calories. This translates to 120 calories out of your 2,000-calorie daily diet, or around 13 grams. Avoid foods high in saturated fat, such as:

- Foods fried or baked using saturated fats such as butter, ghee, lard, coconut oil, and palm oil
- Dairy products such as cream, yogurt, cheese, and whole or 2% milk
- Meats including poultry, lamb, pork, and beef

Caffeine. If you take medication for ADHD that already contains a stimulant, adding another stimulant such as caffeine may overdo it. In turn, a cup of coffee may make you feel more focused, but it can't replace ADHD treatment. If you feel like caffeine is causing you anxiety, an inability to sleep, or stomach issues, limit the following:

- Coffee
- Tea
- Energy drinks
- Soda
- Chocolate

ADHD Diet for Kids

As kids grow and develop, these foods can help them build a healthy brain:

Eggs. The protein and nutrients in eggs help kids concentrate.

- Fold scrambled eggs into a whole-grain tortilla for a filling breakfast or late-afternoon snack. This combination of protein and carbs can keep kids full until their next meal without having an energy crash.
- You can also try serving egg salad sandwiches or a few deviled eggs.

Greek yogurt. Fat is important to brain health. A full-fat Greek yogurt (which has more protein than other yogurts) can help keep brain cells in good form for sending and receiving information.

- Pack Greek yogurt in a lunch with some fun mix-ins: cereal with at least 3 grams of fiber, and blueberries for a dose of nutrients called polyphenols. Dark chocolate chips are another option. They have polyphenols, too. These nutrients are thought to keep the mind sharp by increasing blood flow to the brain.

Greens. Full of folate and vitamins, spinach and kale are linked to lower odds of getting dementia later in life. Kale is a superfood, packed with antioxidants and other things that help new brain cells grow. For some kids, greens are a hard sell. So rather than serving a salad, you may want to try some different ideas:

- Whip spinach or kale into smoothies for snack time.
- Add spinach to omelets or lasagna.
- Make kale chips. Cut kale from stems/ribs, drizzle with olive oil and a bit of salt, and bake.

Nuts and seeds. These are packed with protein, essential fatty acids, vitamins, and minerals and may boost mood and keep your nervous system in check.

- Besides peanut butter, you can try other kinds of nut butter such as sunflower seed butter.
- You can also make pesto by combining pine nuts with olive oil and dark leafy greens, which can serve as a healthful and tasty sauce for pasta.

Fish. Fish is a good source of vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids, which protect the brain from declining mental skills

and memory loss. Salmon, tuna, and sardines are all rich in omega-3s.

- Grill it and offer your child a sauce for dipping, add fish to tacos, or make tuna sandwiches.

Oatmeal. Protein- and fiber-rich oatmeal helps keep heart and brain arteries clear. In one study, kids who ate sweetened oatmeal did better on memory-related school tasks than those who ate a sugary cereal.

- Add cinnamon. Compounds in the spice may protect brain cells, research shows.

Apples and plums. Kids often crave sweets, especially when they're feeling sluggish. Apples and plums are lunchbox-friendly and contain quercetin, an antioxidant that may protect against mental decline.

- The good stuff is often in the skin of the fruits, so buy organic, wash well, and put the fruits in a bowl for quick snacks.

Nutritional Supplements for ADHD

Some experts recommend that people with ADHD take a 100% vitamin and mineral supplement each day. Other nutrition experts, though, think that if you eat a normal, balanced diet, you don't need vitamin or micronutrient supplements. They say there's no scientific evidence that vitamin or mineral supplements help all children with ADHD.

Because ADHD symptoms vary from person to person, work closely with your doctor if you're considering taking a supplement. ADHD supplements might include:

- **Iron.** Research has examined how iron deficiencies could cause children to develop ADHD. Iron supplements, plus zinc, were found to improve symptoms in certain studies of children with ADHD.
- **Zinc.** Studies have examined how a zinc deficiency could increase your risk of ADHD and how the right amount of zinc might improve ADHD symptoms. Although a group of children showed some reduction in ADHD symptoms after taking zinc supplements, more research is needed on a wider scale to prove it works.
- **Omega-3 fatty acid.** Some research has found omega-3 fatty acid supplements to have positive effects on ADHD symptoms. One study of children saw lower impulsiveness scores after adding more omega-3s to their diet for 8 weeks.
- **Vitamin D.** A review of multiple studies found a group of children diagnosed with ADHD had lower levels of vitamin D than a group without ADHD, but more research is required with larger numbers of children. A small study did show improvement in hyperactivity, inattention, and behavior scores in children who had vitamin D supplements along with the prescription medication methylphenidate.
- **Magnesium.** Some small studies have examined how a magnesium deficiency might be related to ADHD, but no clear cause has been identified. In one study where children were given a magnesium supplement plus vitamin D, the participants showed significant reductions in conduct, emotional, and peer problems compared to the placebo group.

While a multivitamin may be OK when children, teens, and adults don't eat balanced diets, megadoses of vitamins can be toxic. Avoid them.

Elimination Diet With ADHD

To follow an elimination diet, you pick a particular food or ingredient you think might be making your symptoms worse. Then

you don't eat anything with that ingredient in it. If the symptoms get better or go away, then you keep avoiding that food.

If you cut a food item from your diet, can it improve your symptoms? Research in all these areas is ongoing and the results are not clear-cut. Most scientists don't recommend this approach for managing ADHD. Still, here are some common areas of concern and what the experts suggest:

Food additives: In 1975, an allergist first proposed that artificial colors, flavors, and preservatives might lead to hyperactivity in some children. Since then, researchers and child behavior experts have hotly debated this issue.

Some say the idea of cutting all those things out of a diet is unfounded and unsupported by science. But research has shown that some food coloring and one preservative did make some children more hyperactive. The effects varied according to age and additives.

Based on this and other recent studies, the American Academy of Pediatrics now agrees that cutting out preservatives and food colorings is a reasonable option for children with ADHD. Some experts recommend that all people with ADHD avoid these substances:

- Artificial colors, especially red and yellow
- Food additives such as aspartame, monosodium glutamate (MSG), and nitrites. Some studies have linked hyperactivity to the preservative sodium benzoate.

Sugar: Some children become hyperactive after eating candy or other sugary foods. However, no evidence suggests that this is a cause of ADHD. For the best overall nutrition, sugary foods should be a small part of anyone's diet. But you can try cutting them to see if symptoms improve.

Caffeine: Most experts recommend that people eat or drink less caffeine or just avoid it. If you take medication for ADHD, caffeine can make some side effects worse.

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