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ADHD Diet: Foods to Eat, Foods to Avoid, &

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Specific ADHD diets may improve symptoms alongside therapy and medication. Foods that can help with ADHD include those rich in omega-3 fatty acids, iron, zinc, and magnesium. Diet changes may also mean avoiding certain foods, such as caffeine and artificial additives. Experienced healthcare professionals can help individuals make the best decisions when adopting ADHD diets.

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ADHD & Diet: How They're Connected

One ADHD diet does not exist, and diet alone cannot cure [attention-deficit/hyperactivity Disorder](#) (ADHD). However, nutrition changes may be effective alongside traditional treatment or as an alternative when medication is not an option.¹

While more research is needed, some evidence suggests ADHD and food have a complex relationship, with some nutrient deficiencies possibly increasing the risk of experiencing [ADHD symptoms](#). Therefore, adding specific foods and supplements to address these deficiencies may help boost focus, attention, and overall well-being.

What Is an ADHD Diet?

An ADHD diet incorporates vitamins and nutrients that can improve symptoms while omitting foods that could worsen symptoms. ADHD diets generally involve protein-rich foods, complex carbohydrates, specific vitamins and minerals, and omega-3 fatty acids. Individuals with [ADHD also avoid added sugars](#), simple carbohydrates, caffeine, and artificial additives. ADHD diets for kids and adults tend to be similar.

Foods That Help With ADHD

Everyone has a different body chemistry, so determining the “best foods for ADHD” is impossible. A “best” diet for ADHD does not exist, either. However, considering how nutrition affects physical and emotional well-being is essential. Nutritional deficiency may exacerbate ADHD symptoms, so prioritize eating a well-rounded, nutritious diet.

Foods to include in an ADHD diet include:

Fruits & Vegetables

Fruits and vegetables contain numerous essential minerals and vitamins. They promote a healthy gut and

can reduce inflammation and digestion problems. Additionally, eating plenty of fruits and vegetables can prevent blood sugar spikes, which can cause irritation, hunger, and other physiological symptoms. Some research shows produce intake correlates with decreased symptoms of inattention in children diagnosed with ADHD.²

Protein

Protein serves many functions, including growing and maintaining muscle tissue, sending messages between tissues and cells, maintaining pH levels, and cultivating immune health. While scientists have not confirmed a specific cause-and-effect relationship between protein and ADHD, some experts agree a protein-rich diet may boost concentration and focus.

Healthy sources of protein for those with ADHD include:

- Meat and poultry
- Fish and shellfish
- Beans and lentils
- Eggs
- Greek yogurt
- Peanuts and almonds
- Cottage cheese
- Rolled oats

Complex Carbohydrates

Complex carbohydrates consist of sugar molecules strung together into complex chains. Various whole

grains, starchy vegetables, beans, oats, and fruits contain these specific nutrients. In some cases, eating complex carbohydrates before bed can help promote sleep, possibly reducing insomnia commonly associated with ADHD.

Complex carbohydrates to include in an ADHD diet include:

- Oatmeal
- Brown rice
- Quinoa
- Lentils
- Chickpeas
- Potatoes
- Beets
- Butternut squash
- Peas
- Apples
- Bananas

Healthy Fats

Research shows consuming healthy fats is essential for boosting brain health and supporting the nervous system. This improved brain functioning may reduce symptoms of ADHD like inattention or poor focus.

Healthy fats to include in an ADHD diet include:

- Avocado
- Oily fish (mackerel, tuna, trout, salmon)
- Eggs
- Nuts

- Seeds
- Olive oil
- Dark chocolate

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Foods to Avoid With ADHD

Research on foods that worsen or trigger ADHD is limited, but some findings suggest a negative relationship between artificial additives, sugar, or caffeine and ADHD. Therefore, some adults and children may notice improved ADHD symptoms when eliminating certain foods. Of course, these changes are person-specific, and individuals with ADHD should discuss possible allergies or intolerances with a doctor before starting an elimination diet for ADHD.

Below are foods to avoid if you have ADHD:

Sugary Foods

Some people believe specific ADHD food triggers may exacerbate unwanted symptoms, including restlessness, hyperactivity, irritability, brain fog, and poor concentration. While research does not suggest one food group *causes* ADHD symptoms, excessive sugary foods may worsen current dysfunction or coincide with more emotional dysregulation. Sugar may also adversely impact the gut, which can affect overall mood.

Below are sugary foods and ingredients to limit in an ADHD diet:

- Corn sweetener
- Dehydrated cane juice
- Corn syrup
- Dextrin
- Maltose
- Molasses
- Rice syrup
- Sucrose

Unhealthy Fats

Unhealthy fats generally refer to saturated or trans fats. To date, trans fats do not have any known health benefits, and eating them in excess may increase vulnerability to developing heart disease, stroke, or diabetes. Foods like whole milk, cheese, and red meat contain saturated fats. Many physicians recommend eating these foods in

moderation.

Below are unhealthy fats to limit in an ADHD diet:

- Fried foods
- Heavy cream
- Nondairy coffee creamer
- Microwave popcorn
- Stick margarine
- Refrigerated dough

Simple Carbohydrates

While researchers have debunked the concept that dietary choices cause ADHD, they do postulate certain foods make ADHD worse. These effects can range in severity, and they may be more noticeable in children or those with [hyperactive ADHD](#).

Below are simple carbohydrates to limit in an ADHD diet:

- White bread
- Regular soda
- White pasta/white rice
- Packaged bakery goods
- Fruit juice
- Breakfast cereal

Caffeine

The effects of caffeine on ADHD are mixed. Some individuals with ADHD report caffeine positively supports their attention, concentration, and overall focus. Others have the opposite reaction. Caffeine may make

them feel more tired, irritable, or restless. In general, children with ADHD should avoid caffeine, particularly if they take stimulant medication.

Artificial Additives

For nearly 50 years, researchers have studied the effects of food dye and artificial flavors on childhood behavior. Multi-analyses show these additives may magnify ADHD symptoms. For example, some parents and teachers notice marked differences in child behavior once they eliminate these ingredients.³

Below are artificial ingredients to avoid in an ADHD diet:

- Artificial colors (yellow and red)
- Aspartame
- Monosodium
- Nitrates
- Sodium benzoate
- MSG

Vitamins & Nutrients for ADHD

While overall research is mixed, some evidence suggests omega-3 fatty acids, iron, zinc, magnesium, and B- and D-vitamins can boost hormones commonly deficient in ADHD. Individuals with ADHD often experience low dopamine levels that impact concentration, impulsivity,

and activity levels. Eating food rich in these specific vitamins and nutrients may help replenish these deficiencies to improve symptoms.

Omega-3 Fatty Acids

ADHD diets rich in omega-3 fatty acids may help boost cognition and attention. Omega-3 fatty acids help regulate dopamine and serotonin deficiencies to target problematic symptoms of ADHD. Individuals with limited food options can also take supplements like fish oil.

Below are omega-3 fatty acids to add to an ADHD diet:

- Salmon
- Mackerel
- Sardines
- Flax seeds
- Chia seeds
- Walnuts
- Soybeans
- Omega-3 enriched eggs

Iron

Iron is an essential mineral that supports overall development and growth. The body uses iron to produce hemoglobin, a protein that transports oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body. Research shows a link between iron deficiency and ADHD, possibly leading to exacerbated hyperactivity symptoms. Therefore, adding iron-rich foods or supplements to an ADHD diet may be beneficial.⁴

Below are iron-rich foods to add to an ADHD diet:

- Beef
- Beans
- Lentils
- Tofu
- Organ meats
- Broccoli
- Nuts

Zinc

Zinc is a nutrient that supports metabolic function and the immune system. Research has shown some relationship between ADHD and zinc levels, although a recent meta-analysis has indicated these findings are inconsistent. Lower levels of zinc may be responsible for magnifying ADHD. Thus, zinc supplementation may improve some unwanted symptoms.⁵

Below are zinc-rich foods to add to an ADHD diet:

- Nuts
- Seeds
- Milk
- Eggs
- Yogurt
- Oysters
- Oats

Magnesium

Magnesium is an essential mineral that supports overall brain health. Although specific research is mixed, some

studies indicate magnesium supplementation can improve anxiety symptoms. Because [ADHD and anxiety](#) commonly co-occur, adding magnesium may prove beneficial for some individuals.

Below are magnesium-rich foods to add to an ADHD diet:

- Almonds
- Brown rice
- Bananas
- Avocado
- Spinach
- Edamame

Vitamin D

Vitamin D occurs in a few foods but is most commonly produced and absorbed through sunlight. Vitamin D deficiencies are associated with mental health symptoms, including increased depression, anxiety, and possibly ADHD. Individuals with ADHD may benefit from more time outside or vitamin D supplements.

Below are vitamin D-rich foods to add to an ADHD diet:

- Salmon
- Mushrooms
- Tuna
- Sardines
- Fatty fish
- Almond milk

Vitamin B

B vitamins support many bodily functions, including transporting oxygen, breaking down amino acids, regulating the nervous system, and releasing energy from carbohydrates. Deficiencies in B vitamins may exacerbate fatigue, irritability, and restlessness for people with ADHD. Low levels also correlate with heightened anxiety symptoms, which can magnify ADHD.

Below are vitamin B-rich foods to add to an ADHD diet:

- Peas
- Nuts
- Wholegrain bread
- Fortified breakfast cereal
- Eggs
- Fish
- Meat

Ginkgo & Ginseng

Ginkgo is part of a tree species, and the extract can help with many functions, including improved memory and strengthened blood circulation. Ginseng plants are an herbal remedy for reducing inflammation, stabilizing blood sugar, improving energy, and supporting cognitive function. Both may be holistic approaches for treating ADHD.

Get Help for ADHD

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Types of ADHD Diets

Some people with ADHD want to optimize nutrition as part of an overall holistic treatment. Discuss any dietary changes with your physician, particularly when considering supplementation or current nutrient deficiencies. Keep in mind that crash diets can be dangerous and ineffective.

ADHD Elimination Diet

When determining the best or worst foods for ADHD, some people try an elimination diet. This approach simply entails removing foods, one by one, to discern if a specific food (or type of food) adversely impacts ADHD symptoms. Remember, remove one ingredient at a time to monitor any changes.

The following additives are removed in an elimination diet for ADHD:

- [Red dye 40](#) (a synthetic food dye)
- Aspartame (an artificial sweetener)
- Monosodium glutamate (a flavor enhancer)
- Sodium nitrite
- Sodium benzoate

The Few Foods Diet

The Few Foods Diet can be beneficial, especially for children with ADHD who are too young for or do not respond to medication.⁶ This ADHD diet may help those who believe specific foods worsen or exacerbate their symptoms. However, the Few Foods diet can be incredibly restrictive, so individuals should work with a healthcare professional to ensure safe practices.

The Few Foods Diet includes:

- **Elimination:** This step involves removing all but a small number of foods, including any foods that could worsen symptoms of ADHD. These changes are short-term.

- **Reintroduction:** During the reintroduction step, individuals slowly add foods back into the diet, one at a time, to identify how their minds and bodies react. Reintroduction allows people to determine if a food triggers ADHD symptoms.
- **Treatment:** This third step involves making an individualized diet plan based on observed reactions to each food. This longer-term diet plan only removes foods identified as triggers for ADHD symptoms and should be developed with a healthcare professional.

The Mediterranean Diet

The Mediterranean diet emphasizes whole grains, vegetables, healthy fats, and minimally processed foods. Experts based this method on the dietary preferences of populations living along the Mediterranean Sea. The Mediterranean diet typically includes more plant-based foods like seafood, oils, and green vegetables.

Sample ADHD Diet Meal Plans

ADHD diets can provide additional support, but individuals should find a balance when maintaining healthy nutrition to avoid stress and anxiety. Work alongside healthcare professionals when considering dietary changes to identify how different foods impact you as an individual and to prevent disordered eating.

ADHD Diet Plan for Kids

Parents should consult with a pediatrician before reviewing ADHD diets for children. A diet for kids with ADHD should not feel restrictive. Parents should remember that children have developing bodies, and many cannot avoid entire food groups, ingredients, or dishes. Ensure your child stays healthy by consulting a physician and/or dietician.

Here is a sample ADHD diet meal plan for children and teens:

- **Breakfast:** Almond butter spread on whole-grain toast with apple or banana slices is a healthy breakfast option for children with ADHD.
- **Snack:** Carrots with hummus or cheese and crackers make for a nutritious snack.
- **Lunch:** Lunch could be a turkey sandwich with fruit and nuts. Tofu or peanut butter could stand in for vegetarians.
- **Snack:** Consider yogurt mixed with honey and berries or a fortified granola bar and fruit.
- **Dinner:** Whole-grain pasta with tomato or meat sauce and a salad topped with healthy oil are good dinner options.
- **Dessert/snack:** A few pieces of dark chocolate or frozen yogurt

ADHD Diet Plan for Adults

A single best diet for adults with ADHD does not exist. Instead, use trial and error with various foods to determine your optimal meal plan. As with children, no ADHD diet for adults should be restrictive. Always consult your healthcare professional if you have questions or concerns.

Here is a sample ADHD diet meal plan for adults:

- **Breakfast:** Try almond butter spread on whole-grain toast with banana slices.
- **Snack:** Greek yogurt with honey could make a good morning snack.
- **Lunch:** Lunch could be a salmon filet alongside quinoa and mixed vegetables, including broccoli and peas. Tofu can stand as a protein alternative for vegetarians.
- **Snack:** Hummus with carrot and celery sticks would make a high-protein afternoon snack.
- **Dinner:** An ideal dinner could be spaghetti squash topped with turkey or tofu meatballs alongside a spinach salad with oil and vinegar.
- **Dessert/snack:** For dessert, try a naturally sweetened chocolate chia seed pudding.

When to Seek Professional Support

Consider seeking professional help if you experience distress because of your ADHD symptoms. Healthcare professionals can help you develop an ADHD diet that

best suits your needs and treatment goals. For therapeutic support, [find a neurodiversity-affirming therapist](#) who identifies as neurodiverse or lists ADHD as a specialty. You can use an [online therapist directory](#) to find an in-person provider or seek an [online therapy platform](#) for at-home care.

For some individuals with ADHD, medication can be an essential part of treatment. As with therapy, [online psychiatrist options](#) may be a good choice for finding ADHD medication management.

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In My Experience



Amanda Stretcher, MA, LPC, S

“Addressing your diet can help provide additional support when living with ADHD. Finding the right treatment combination for you is crucial, whether through medication, therapy, or alternative approaches like diet and nutrition changes. Look for healthcare professionals experienced in treating ADHD. Consider including professionals such as psychiatrists, therapists, and dietitians in your treatment. For most individuals, treatment involves multiple different approaches. Just because one approach alone doesn’t work for you doesn’t mean there isn’t something that will work.”

ADHD Diet & Nutrition Infographics

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