

What are the best diets for ADHD?

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While there is no definitive ADHD diet, many sources claim that certain diets, foods, and meal plans can help reduce symptoms.

Various foods can affect energy and concentration levels. Certain choices may, therefore, be better for people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder ([ADHD](#)).

Some research suggests that following specific diets — such as elimination diets, the Few Foods diet, and the [Mediterranean diet](#) — could play a role in managing ADHD.

In this article, we first take a look at specific foods that could improve or worsen ADHD symptoms. Then, we explore what the research says about specific ADHD diets.

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Best foods for ADHD

Certain foods are better at keeping a person's energy and blood sugar levels stable and improving concentration. These foods may especially benefit people with ADHD.

The following may be particularly helpful:

Protein-rich foods



Medically reviewed by
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Eggs and whole-grain bread may benefit people with ADHD.

Protein is essential for the health of the brain, and it plays a key role in producing brain chemicals called neurotransmitters.

Including protein in a meal also prevents spikes in blood glucose levels. Some people suggest that these surges increase hyperactivity.

Foods rich in protein include:

- meat and poultry products
- fish and shellfish
- beans and lentils
- eggs
- nuts

Complex carbohydrates

Like protein, complex [carbohydrates](#) can help prevent blood sugar spikes.

Eating this type of carbohydrate also keeps a person feeling fuller for longer, which may stop them from snacking on sugar-filled foods.

In addition, when people eat them before bedtime, these foods may encourage better sleep.

The foods below contain complex carbohydrates:

- fruits
- vegetables
- whole-grain bread and pasta
- brown rice
- beans and lentils

Vitamins and minerals

Some [studies](#) link ADHD with low levels of certain micronutrients, including [iron](#), [magnesium](#), [zinc](#), [vitamin B-6](#), and [vitamin D](#).



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However, it is unclear whether these lower levels lead to the development of ADHD and whether consuming more of these nutrients can improve symptoms.

Nonetheless, they are all essential nutrients in the diet, so eating more foods that contain them is unlikely to cause harm.

People can find these nutrients in the following foods:

- **iron:** beef, liver, kidney beans, and tofu
- **zinc:** meat, shellfish, beans, and nuts
- **magnesium:** [pumpkin](#) seeds, almonds, spinach, and peanuts
- **vitamin B-6:** eggs, fish, peanuts, and potatoes
- **vitamin D:** fatty fish, beef liver, egg yolks, and fortified foods

Omega-3 fatty acids



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Chia seeds are a good source of omega-3 fatty acids.

[Omega-3](#) fatty acids are essential fats that a person must get from their diet. They play a role in heart and brain health.

Children with ADHD may have reduced levels of omega-3 fats. Some [research](#) [•] suggests that consuming more omega-3s may help modestly improve symptoms.

According to an interview conducted by a group of nonprofit organizations called [Understood.org](#), omega-3s may improve attention, focus, motivation, and working memory in children with ADHD.

However, they caution that more research is necessary and that omega-3 fatty acids are not a substitute for ADHD medications.

Some sources of omega-3 fatty acids include:

- fatty fish, such as salmon and tuna

- walnuts
- chia seeds
- flax seeds



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Foods to limit or avoid

Adults and children with ADHD may feel better if they limit or avoid the following:

Sugar

Eating sugary foods can cause blood glucose spikes and crashes, which can affect energy levels. Some caregivers report a link between sugar consumption and hyperactivity in children with ADHD.

While some [studies](#) indicate a link between high consumption of sugar and soft drinks with a higher prevalence of ADHD diagnosis, other [research](#) ⁹ finds no connection.

Even if it does not improve ADHD symptoms, limiting sugar intake is a healthful choice for everyone, as it may reduce the risk of [diabetes](#), [obesity](#), and tooth decay.

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Other simple carbohydrates

Sugar is a simple — or refined — carbohydrate.

Other simple carbohydrates can also contribute to rapid changes in blood sugar levels and people should only consume them in moderation.

The foods below contain simple carbohydrates:

- candy
- white bread
- white rice
- white pasta
- potatoes without skins
- chips
- sodas
- sports drinks
- potato fries

Caffeine

Small amounts of caffeine may benefit some people with ADHD — some [research](#) suggests that it can increase concentration levels.

However, caffeine can intensify the effects of certain ADHD medications, including any adverse reactions that a person may experience.

Artificial additives

Some children with ADHD can benefit from removing artificial additives from their diets.

The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) (AAP) recommend that children avoid these additives, particularly food colorings because they can worsen ADHD symptoms.

Artificial additives may also interfere with hormones, growth, and development.

Many prepackaged and processed products contain artificial coloring, flavors, and preservatives, including some:

- breakfast cereals
- candies
- cookies
- soft drinks
- fruit punches
- [vitamins](#) for children

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Allergens

Some researchers claim that removing potential allergens — such as gluten, wheat, and soy — can improve focus and reduce hyperactivity.

However, eliminating these allergens likely only benefits those who actually have an allergy or intolerance. Consider discussing [food allergies](#) with a doctor or dietitian before removing these foods from the diet.

Diets for ADHD

While there is no cure for ADHD, many people discuss certain diets or foods that they believe can help manage ADHD symptoms, such as hyperactivity and difficulty concentrating.

The following sections look at the research behind various diets that people believe may reduce symptoms of ADHD.

An elimination diet: Removing artificial additives

The [AAP](#) recommend that children avoid artificial additives, warning that they could worsen ADHD symptoms.

Following a diet that eliminates additives would involve not eating:

- artificial colors
- artificial flavors
- preservatives
- artificial sweeteners

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Many breakfast cereals, candies, and sodas contain these chemicals.

Over the years, various researchers have looked into the effects of additives on ADHD.

According to a [2017 review](#)[🔗], eliminating additives may have a small effect on ADHD symptoms. The authors suggest that the specific benefits may also extend to children without the condition.

The Few Foods diet

The Few Foods diet is a short-term intervention that helps people determine whether certain foods make their ADHD symptoms worse.

It is highly restrictive and involves eating only a small number of foods that are unlikely to cause an adverse reaction.

If a person notices a reduction in their symptoms after eliminating certain foods, this suggests that a food allergy or intolerance could be making their ADHD symptoms worse.

After beginning with the Few Foods diet, people gradually reintroduce other foods and watch for a reaction.

A different [2017 review](#)[🔗] confirms that the Few Foods diet could help children identify and eliminate problematic foods.

The Few Foods diet is extremely restrictive at the start. For example, one [diet plan](#)[🔗] involves eating only lamb, chicken, potatoes, rice, [bananas](#), apples, and cruciferous vegetables.

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The Mediterranean diet

The Mediterranean diet is a safe diet for people with ADHD.

The Mediterranean diet is well known for benefiting the health of the heart and brain. It involves eating mainly:

- fruits
- vegetables
- whole grains
- legumes
- nuts
- healthful fats, such as olive oil

Some [research](#) suggests that not following a Mediterranean diet is associated with ADHD diagnosis. However, the results do not suggest that a Mediterranean diet could prevent or treat ADHD symptoms.

Nonetheless, because of the benefits to other areas of health, it is a safe diet for people with ADHD.

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What Foods Are Good For Helping Depression?



Lifestyle remedies like diet can help boost a person's well-being. This video shares some food recommendations that can help manage depression.



1:08

What Foods Are Good For Helping Depression?



1:10

How to Boost Serotonin and Improve Mood



1:09

How Can You Stop a Panic Attack



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Other diet tips

The following diet tips may also benefit people with ADHD:

- Eat balanced meals. Try to include a mix of vegetables, whole grains, protein, and omega-3 fatty acids in most meals.
- Schedule regular meal and snack times, as routine is important for children with ADHD.
- Do not skip meals, as this could lead to blood sugar crashes and excessive junk food consumption.
- Keep plenty of healthful foods on hand for a quick snack, such as fruits, nuts, and chopped vegetables.
- Speak to a doctor about taking a multivitamin and multimineral supplement, which may be especially helpful for picky eaters and people with nutrient deficiencies.
- Check all ingredient labels on food packaging, and avoid foods that contain artificial additives and high amounts of sugar.
- Shop around the perimeter of the grocery store, which tends to contain the most minimally processed whole foods.

Sample meal plan for children

Try the following healthful meal plan for children with ADHD:

breakfast: scrambled eggs with cherry tomatoes on whole-grain toast, and a small smoothie made with milk, spinach, banana, chia seeds, and frozen strawberries

snack: sticks of cucumber and bell peppers with hummus

lunch: a cheese and bean quesadilla with guacamole and salsa, and a slice of melon

snack: trail mix with walnuts, almonds, and dried berries

dinner: homemade salmon fish sticks, baked potato, and green vegetables

dessert (optional): frozen chocolate pudding made with low-fat milk

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Sample meal plan for adults

This healthful meal plan may be a good option for adults with ADHD:

breakfast: avocado and eggs on whole-wheat toast, herbal tea or coffee

snack: yogurt with berries and chia seeds

lunch: a salad with baked salmon and [quinoa](#) on a bed of mixed leaves, cucumber, and bell peppers, topped with sunflower seeds

snack: sliced apple dipped in peanut butter

dinner: chicken and vegetable curry with brown rice

dessert (optional): 1 ounce of good-quality dark chocolate, and herbal tea

Summary

Some research suggests that certain dietary choices may help with some of the symptoms of ADHD. However, the evidence is limited.

In general, the best diet for people with ADHD is the diet that doctors recommend for most other people — one that is rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, healthful fats, and lean proteins. It should include limited amounts of saturated fats and junk foods.

People with food allergies or intolerances should avoid trigger foods. Also, some people require vitamin and mineral supplements, though it is important to speak with a doctor before taking them.

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