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Sugar and ADHD: What's the Connection?



Medically reviewed by
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March 19, 2021

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Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common neurological condition that affects [more than 6.1 million](#) people in the U.S. It's been suggested that certain dietary factors, such as a high sugar intake, can have an impact on ADHD.

Although some studies have shown that sugar intake can negatively impact ADHD symptoms, the overall research isn't conclusive.

In this article, we'll explore what the current literature says about the relationship between ADHD and sugar, and what treatment options are available for symptoms.

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The science on sugar and ADHD

There's been extensive research done on the correlation between sugar consumption and ADHD risk and symptoms. While some research suggests that sugar can negatively affect ADHD, studies have shown conflicting results.

Dietary patterns

In a [2019 review of studies](#), researchers went over the literature on the relationship between dietary patterns and ADHD.

Results of the analysis showed that "unhealthy" dietary patterns, like a [high intake](#) of refined sugar or saturated fat, may increase the risk of ADHD. Alternately, "healthy" dietary patterns, like a high intake of fruits and vegetables, seemed to have a protective effect.

Soft drinks

Another recent [review of studies](#) looked at the link between sugar and soft drink

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consumption and ADHD symptoms.

According to the results, increased consumption of sugar and sugar-sweetened beverages caused an increase in ADHD symptoms. However, this study noted that more research is needed to account for other potential factors.

Sucrose

Although these study results indicate that there’s a negative relationship between sugar intake and ADHD, not all studies support this. In one [2019 study](#), researchers investigated whether sucrose consumption was related to the development of ADHD.

Results of this study found that among children aged 6 to 11, increased sucrose consumption wasn’t associated with an increased risk of ADHD. Although sucrose is only one type of sugar, these results may show that only certain types of sugar influence ADHD.

Artificial additives

It’s also been suggested that artificial additives, which are often found in sugar-heavy foods, may negatively affect ADHD symptoms. However, much of the research on this topic appears to be biased or flawed.

For example, a [2015 review of studies](#) looked at 24 studies on artificial food coloring (AFC) and 10 additional studies on dietary restrictions for ADHD.

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Although dietary restriction seemed to be beneficial for some children with ADHD, the available studies on the link between AFC and ADHD were weak.

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ADHD and sugar addiction

Research on the connection between ADHD and sugar addiction is sparse, with very few studies touching on this topic.

One [2010 review](#) discusses a potential link between ADHD and overeating, which may extend to sugar addiction.

In this review, the author explains that certain behaviors associated with ADHD — especially those that are impulsive or inattentive — may contribute to overeating. In turn, overeating may become a symptom of a larger [addiction](#) to food.

However, it's important to note that the research on the link between these conditions is limited.

ADHD and caffeine

Research on ADHD and caffeine is broad, ranging from the impact of caffeine during pregnancy on ADHD risk, to the impact of caffeine on ADHD symptoms.

Multiple [studies](#) [🔗] have suggested that caffeine consumption may help reduce the symptoms of ADHD. This is most likely due to caffeine's effects on the dopaminergic system, as well as other potential interactions with neurotransmitters.

Interestingly, one [study](#) [🔗] on caffeine consumption and sleep quality found that adolescents with ADHD consume more caffeine later in the day. This increased caffeine intake may be due to the positive benefits of caffeine on symptoms, but more research is still needed.

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How to curb your sugar intake

For most people, it isn't recommended that they eliminate any single nutrient — such as carbohydrates — from the diet. Instead, if you feel sugar is negatively affecting your ADHD symptoms, you can limit the amount (and type) of sugar you eat with these [simple tips](#):

- **Cut down slowly.** If you're someone who eats a lot of sugar, you might find it hard to cut back suddenly. Instead, you can cut back slowly by eating or using 3/4 the normal amount you normally use, then 1/2, 1/4, and so on.
- **Limit processed foods.** Although processed foods can have a place in a balanced diet, they can be easy to overeat. Many processed foods have added sugars, which should be eaten sparingly.
- **Swap out sugary drinks.** Sugary drinks, such as sodas and [juices](#), often contain lots of added sugar. If you've been trying to consume less added sugar, try water, tea, and coffee instead.
- **Read nutrition labels.** Learn how to read a nutrition label so that you can find out how much "added sugar" a food item contains. This can help you limit how much added sugar you're eating each day.
- **Experiment with substitutions.** Before you reach for the honey, sugar, or other

sweeteners, consider what else you can use to add flavor, like cinnamon, nutmeg, lemon, and other extracts.

Other treatments

ADHD [treatment options](#) often include medication, therapy, and behavioral interventions to reduce the symptoms of this condition.

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Medication

Medication is one of the most effective [treatment options for ADHD](#) and is often effective even when used on its own. Medications for ADHD may include:

- **Stimulants.** Central nervous system (CNS) stimulants, such as Adderall and Concerta, are the most commonly prescribed. CNS stimulants help improve concentration and focus by increasing levels of dopamine and norepinephrine in the brain.
- **Non-stimulants.** Non-stimulant medications, such as Strattera and Pamelor, can be prescribed when stimulants aren't an option. Non-stimulants help increase levels of norepinephrine in the brain, which can improve memory and attention.

Therapy

Therapy is an option for people who are strongly impacted by ADHD symptoms, and who'd benefit from mental health support. Therapy for ADHD may include:

- **Psychotherapy.** Psychotherapy can be beneficial for both children and adults with ADHD. For example, [cognitive behavioral therapy \(CBT\)](#) can help analyze and change thoughts or behaviors that may be making symptoms worse.
- **Behavior and social therapy.** Behavior therapy is helpful for learning how to adjust ADHD behaviors, while social skills training can help improve problematic ADHD-related behaviors.
- **Support groups.** While support groups are often geared towards parents of children with ADHD, adults with ADHD can also benefit from peer support. These groups can also offer other resources for the treatment and management of ADHD.

Behavioral

Behavioral and lifestyle interventions can help make it easier to manage some of the more disruptive symptoms of ADHD. These interventions may include:

- **Identify your triggers.** Certain [triggers](#) can cause an increase in ADHD symptoms. Once you're able to identify these triggers, you can adjust your lifestyle habits to reduce the likelihood of episodes.
- **Create a schedule.** While a schedule is especially helpful for children with ADHD, most adults also benefit from a set schedule. Scheduling wake and sleep times, mealtimes, and more can help reduce the stress of last-minute decision-making.
- **Organize your life.** With ADHD, it can be hard to keep track of responsibilities such as work, schoolwork, or other obligations. Organizing both your personal and professional life can make it easy to stay on top of tasks.

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When to talk with a doctor about ADHD

If you notice that your ADHD symptoms become worse when you consume large amounts of sugar, you should speak with your doctor. They can review your medical history and dietary intake, and make suggestions for monitoring potential [dietary triggers](#).

In some cases, you may even be referred out to a nutritionist or dietitian for further analysis and potential [dietary interventions](#).

The bottom line

Although sugar may exacerbate symptoms in some people with ADHD, more research is still needed to determine how common this connection is.

Ultimately, ADHD triggers can differ from person to person, so it can be difficult to narrow down any one specific trigger like sugar.

If you feel like you experience a worsening of ADHD symptoms with high sugar intake, consider reaching out to your doctor for more information on how to move forward.

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Mar 19, 2021

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