

ADHD Medication & Treatment > How Should I Treat My Child's ADHD?

CAN WE TREAT ADHD NATURALLY?

Why Sugar is Kryptonite: ADHD Diet Truths

Does an ADHD diet work? Yes, following an ADHD nutrition plan rich in protein and vitamins can help control symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. But only if you avoid sugar, artificial flavors, and common allergens as well. Here's what to eat and what to avoid.

| By [ADDitude Editors](#) | ✓ [Verified](#) | Medically reviewed by [ADDitude's ADHD Medical Review Panel](#)

| Updated on March 7, 2024

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Your ADHD Diet: What to Eat For Symptom Control

The bad news: Deficiencies in certain types of foods can worsen symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children and adults. The good news: An ADHD diet that boasts adequate levels of the right foods actually optimizes brain function.

Protein for ADHD Brain Function

Foods rich in protein — lean beef, pork, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, nuts, soy, and low-fat dairy products — can have beneficial effects on [ADHD symptoms](#). Protein-rich foods are used by the body to make neurotransmitters, the chemicals released by brain cells to communicate with each other. Protein can prevent surges in blood sugar, which increase hyperactivity and impulsivity.

“Because the body makes brain-awakening neurotransmitters when you eat protein, start your day with a breakfast that includes it,” says Laura Stevens, M.S., a nutritionist at Purdue University and author of [12 Effective Ways to Help Your ADD/ADHD Child](#). “Don’t stop there. Look for ways to slip in lean protein during the day, as well.”

Try: thinkThin protein bars, Larabars, Raw Revolution bars, or Berry Blendz fruit smoothies.

An ADHD Diet of Balanced Meals

Faye Berger Mitchell, a registered dietician from Bethesda, Maryland, has a nine-year-old daughter who received an [ADHD diagnosis](#) two years ago. While her daughter takes stimulants to control her ADHD symptoms, Mitchell concluded that a pill is not enough. She finds that when her daughter eats a well-balanced diet, including vegetables, complex carbohydrates, fruits, and plenty of protein, her behavior tends to be more consistently under control.

10 FOODS TO AVOID WITH ADHD

ADHD SELF TEST

QUICK WAYS TO LOWER YOUR A1C

10 SYMPTOMS OF ADHD

Ned Hallowell, M.D., founder of the Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health, in Sudbury, Massachusetts, and New York City, advises all of his patients with ADHD to think about their plates when preparing a meal. Half of the plate, he recommends, should be filled with fruits or vegetables, one-fourth with a protein, and one-fourth with carbohydrates.

[Read This: Free Guide to Delicious (and ADHD-Friendly!) Eating]

Hallowell also advocates eating several servings of whole grains, which are rich in fiber, each day to prevent blood sugar levels from spiking and then plummeting.

Vitamins and Minerals to Supplement Your ADHD Diet

“Many diets are deficient in key vitamins, minerals, and fats that may improve attention and alertness,” says Richard Brown, M.D., author of *How to Use Herbs, Nutrients, and Yoga in Mental Health Care*. He suggests that children and adults who have been diagnosed with ADHD be tested for nutritional deficiencies.

“Supplements and diet can correct nutrient shortfalls that exacerbate ADHD symptoms,” adds Brown.

Zinc, Iron, and Magnesium In Your ADHD Diet

Zinc regulates the neurotransmitter dopamine and may make methylphenidate more effective by improving the brain’s response to dopamine. Low levels of this mineral correlate with inattention. Iron is also necessary for making dopamine. One small study¹ showed ferritin levels (a measure of iron stores) to be low in 84 percent of children with ADHD compared to 18 percent of the control group. Low iron levels correlate with cognitive deficits and severe ADHD. Like zinc, magnesium is used to make neurotransmitters involved in attention and concentration, and it has a calming effect on the brain.

10 FOODS THAT CAUSE ADHD

ADHD SELF TEST

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BEST FOODS FOR ADHD

All three minerals are found in lean meats, poultry, seafood, nuts, soy, and fortified cereals. While diet is the safest way to increase all three mineral levels, a multivitamin/multimineral with iron will ensure that you or your child gets the daily reference value (DRV) of these minerals.

B Vitamins In Your ADHD Diet

Studies suggest that giving children who have low levels of B vitamins a supplement improved some IQ scores (by 16 points) and reduced aggression and antisocial behavior. “Vitamin B-6 seems to increase the brain’s levels

of dopamine, which improves alertness,” says Brown.

Try: Bio-Strath, a Swiss formula, available in pill and liquid forms at vitacost.com, was used in many studies on vitamin B and ADHD. Drugstore chains also offer inexpensive, high-quality, store-brand B-vitamin formulations.

Multivitamins In Your ADHD Diet

If your child is a picky eater, or if he eats lots of take-out food, chips, and soda, he probably isn't getting the daily recommended value of vitamins and minerals. A daily multivitamin/multimineral will ensure that he does, no matter how finicky he is.

Try: Hero Yummi Bears Multi-Vitamin + Minerals. They contain no artificial colors and flavors, which increase hyperactivity in some children with ADHD.

Omega-3 Fatty Acids In Your ADHD Diet

[Omega-3s](#) are believed to be important in brain and nerve cell function. A new study², conducted at Göteborg University, in Sweden, concluded that daily doses of omega-3s — found in cold-water, fatty fish, such as sardines, tuna, and salmon — reduced ADHD symptoms by 50 percent. Dr. Sven Ostlund followed a group of ADHD children aged 8–18 who took [fish oil](#) daily. Within six months, there was a noticeable decrease in ADHD symptoms in 25 percent of the children.

Another study³ showed that omega-3s tend to break down more readily in the bodies of patients with ADHD than in those without the condition. “People with ADHD who have low blood levels of omega-3s will show the biggest improvement in mental focus and cognitive function,” says Brown. “Sometimes the change is dramatic.”

John Ratey, M.D., associate clinical professor of psychiatry at [Harvard Medical School](#), recommends that you choose a supplement that contains more EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) than DHA (docosahexaenoic acid). You should consult with your physician about finding the [best omega 3 supplement](#) for your specific needs.

Try: OmegaBrite, Omega Rx, MorEPA, or Nordic Naturals pills; or Barlean's Omega Swirl drink

“Herbs may improve blood flow to the brain, increasing alertness while reducing aggressive behavior,” Brown says. Talk with your doctor, or a psycho-pharmacologist, before starting an herb regimen.

Ginkgo and Ginseng In Your ADHD Diet

“These herbs are cognitive activators,” says Brown. They act like stimulants, without the side effects of ADHD medication. Typically, adults and children who take ginkgo and ginseng improve on ADHD rating scales, and are less impulsive and distractible. Asian ginseng may overstimulate younger children. If this happens, switch to American ginseng.

Try: Hsu's Ginseng is a reliable mail-order source for American and Asian versions of the herb. According to Brown, Ginkoba and Ginkgold are the best brands of ginkgo.

Pycnogenol In Your ADHD Diet

An extract made from French maritime pine bark, pycnogenol was found to improve hyperactivity and sharpen attention, concentration, and visual-motor coordination in students after one month, based on standardized measures and teacher and parent ratings. The herb is also rich in polyphenols, antioxidants that protect brain cells from free radical damage. “The first double-blind study⁴ on the herb was published in 2006, confirming its benefit,” says Brown. “Larger randomized trials, though, are needed.”

Try: Purchase pycnogenol from Nature’s Best.

Rhodiola Rosea In Your ADHD Diet

Made from a plant of the same name that grows in the Arctic, this herb can improve alertness, attention, and accuracy. It can be too stimulating for young children, and is occasionally beneficial in children ages eight to 12. It is most useful, says Brown, for students in junior high, high school, and college, who have to complete long papers and spend hours reading.

Try: Rhodiola rosea is available from Ameriden International and GNC.

What Foods Should Be Avoided with ADHD?

High-Sugar Foods and Snacks

Several studies suggest that some kids who have ADHD are “turned on” by copious amounts of sugar. One study⁵ concluded that the more sugar [hyperactive children](#) consumed, the more destructive and restless they became. A study⁶ conducted at Yale University indicates that high-sugar diets increase inattention in some kids.

Some common items to avoid include fruit “drinks” or “cocktails,” both of which are higher in sugar than 100 percent fruit juice. Read food labels carefully, looking for the following ingredients (code words for sugar): high-fructose corn sweetener, dehydrated cane juice; dextrin; dextrose; maltodextrin; sucrose; molasses; and malt syrup.

Artificial Dyes and Preservatives

Studies published in [The Lancet](#)⁷, [Pediatrics](#)⁸, and [The Journal of Pediatrics](#)⁹ suggest that some children with ADHD are adversely affected by food additives. A recent study¹⁰ indicates that artificial food coloring and flavors, as well as the preservative sodium benzoate, make some kids without ADHD hyperactive.

Avoid colorful cereals, like Fruit Loops and Lucky Charms. Cheerios are better, and lower in sugar. Substitute 100 percent fruit juice for soft drinks and fruit punches, most of which are artificially colored and flavored. If your child wants a treat, offer him Pepperidge Farm Chessmen cookies, which are free of dyes and low in sugar.

Foods That Cause Allergies

According to studies, gluten, wheat, corn, and soy cause some children to lose focus and become more

hyperactive. Vincent Monastra, Ph.D., author of *Parenting Children with ADHD*, suggests that all children be screened for food allergies before being prescribed medication for ADHD. Talk with your doctor about testing for allergies.

[10 *Vitamins and Minerals Recommended for ADHD*]

How to Treat ADHD in Children: Next Questions

1. What ADHD medications are used to treat children?
2. Is ADHD medication right for my child?
3. What are common side effects associated with ADHD medication?
4. What natural treatments help kids with ADHD?
 - What are the most effective natural ADHD treatments for kids?
 - What foods can help control ADHD symptoms?
 - What vitamins and supplements should my child take?
 - Does brain training help with ADHD?
 - How much and what type of exercise helps kids with ADHD?
 - What types of therapy help patients with ADHD?
5. What if the medication stops working?
6. How can I find an ADHD specialist near me?

¹ Konofal, Eric, Michel Lecendreux, Isabelle Arnulf, and Marie-Christine Mouren. "Iron Deficiency in Children With Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder." *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, vol. 158, no. 12, 2004, pp. 1113.

² Johnson, M., S. Ostlund, G. Fransson, B. Kadesjo, and C. Gillberg. "Omega-3/Omega-6 Fatty Acids for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: A Randomized Placebo-Controlled Trial in Children and Adolescents." *Journal of Attention Disorders*, vol. 12, no. 5, 2009, pp. 394-401.

³ Young, Genevieve, and Julie Conquer. "Omega-3 Fatty Acids and Neuropsychiatric Disorders." *Reproduction Nutrition Development*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2005, pp. 1-28., doi:10.1051/rnd:2005001.

⁴ Trebatická, Jana, Soňa Kopasová, Zuzana Hradečná, Kamil Činovský, Igor Škodáček, Ján Šuba, Jana Muchová, Ingrid Žitňanová, Iweta Waczulíková, Peter Rohdewald, and Zdeňka Ďuračková. "Treatment of ADHD with French Maritime Pine Bark Extract, Pycnogenol®." *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, vol. 15, no. 6, 2006, pp. 329-35.

⁵ Prinz, Robert, et al. "Dietary Correlates of Hyperactive Behavior in Children." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, vol. 48, no. 6, 1980, pp. 760-769.

⁶ Jones, T W, et al. "Enhanced Adrenomedullary Response and Increased Susceptibility to Neuroglycopenia: Mechanisms Underlying the Adverse Effects of Sugar Ingestion in Healthy Children." *The Journal of Pediatrics*, vol. 126, no. 2, 1995, pp. 171-177.

⁷ Mccann, Donna, et al. "Food Additives and Hyperactive Behaviour in 3-Year-Old and 8/9-Year-Old Children in the Community: A Randomised, Double-Blinded, Placebo-Controlled Trial." *The Lancet*, vol. 370, no. 9598, 2007, pp. 1560-1567., doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(07)61306-3.

⁸ Kaplan, Bonnie J., Jane McNicol, Richard A. Conte, and H. K. Moghadam. "Overall Nutrient Intake of Preschool Hyperactive and Normal Boys." *Pediatrics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1989, pp. 127-32.

⁹ Rowe, Katherine S., and Kenneth J. Rowe. "Synthetic Food Coloring and Behavior: A Dose Response Effect in a Double-Blind,

Placebo-Controlled, Repeated-Measures Study.” *The Journal of Pediatrics*, vol. 125, no. 5, 1994, pp. 691-98.

¹⁰ Mccann, Donna, et al. “Food Additives and Hyperactive Behaviour in 3-Year-Old and 8/9-Year-Old Children in the Community: A Randomised, Double-Blinded, Placebo-Controlled Trial.” *The Lancet*, vol. 370, no. 9598, 2007, pp. 1560-1567., doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(07)61306-3.



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