

## Special Diets for ADHD

By Judith Aronson-Ramos, MD

At the present time there isn't a single specialized diet documented to treat or improve the symptoms of ADHD. This is in spite of many different claims and anecdotal evidence to the contrary. The majority of specialized diets are elimination diets, which remove offending foods and additives from the diet. However, from the Feingold diet to casein and gluten free among others, there is still no scientifically sound evidence that any of these diets work. Still, many families want to do something to improve nutrition and hedge their bets on using dietary interventions which may at least positively contribute to improving the symptoms of their child with ADHD.

What we do know at this point is that some children are sensitive to dyes and preservatives which may worsen hyperactivity and impulsivity. This is true more for younger children. Sugar has not been shown to be a factor in worsening ADHD. However it only makes sense that eating poorly - a lot of junk food, refined carbohydrates, excessively processed foods, etc can't be good for you.

What I can recommend are certain practices of healthy eating which are not restrictive and may benefit the ADHD child or adolescent. This includes the following principals:

1. Eat clean whole foods – this means shopping the periphery of the grocery store more than the aisles. Eat fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, meat, fish, cheese, yogurt (essentially real foods). For more on this topic read Food Rules by Michael Pollan, and visit his website [www.michaelpollan.com](http://www.michaelpollan.com) . He also has a page of links for families.
2. Avoid preservatives, dyes, trans-fats, high fructose corn syrup and additives where possible. If you can eat organic this may be preferable, though this has not been of proven benefit either. However, eating organic often eliminates many of the ingredients in processed foods you want to avoid so it does simplify shopping.
3. Include the “super foods” in your diet. These foods have well documented health benefits as anti-oxidants, improved immune function, enhanced neurological functioning, lowering cholesterol and more. You can be creative in how these foods are served and prepared to get your children to eat them...good for parents too! There is bound to be something on this list for everyone.
  - Beans, Blueberries, Broccoli, Oats, Oranges, Pumpkin, Salmon, Soy
  - Spinach, Tea (green or black), Tomatoes, Turkey, Walnuts, Yogurt
4. Be sure your child is ingesting enough protein in the day, this means with breakfast and lunch. Many children are protein free throughout their day eating mostly carbohydrates – bagels, waffles and cereal for breakfast; pasta, pizza, and salad for lunch. These are low protein meals. Encourage at least a small amount of protein – equivalent to the size of your child fist with all meals, especially breakfast and lunch. This means at breakfast including foods such as:

eggs, yogurt, nuts, high protein cereals and breads, energy bars with protein, smoothies with protein powder, healthy breakfast meats (turkey sausage and bacon etc.). Lunch ideally should have a protein source such as: a turkey sandwich, PBJ on whole grain bread, healthy lunch meats, tuna(sparingly), high protein pasta, bean burrito, etc. It can be done! School bought lunches are bound to be a bust, unless you have a cafeteria offering healthy choices.

5. Avoid sugary and caffeinated drinks these cause high peaks and troughs in insulin production and will impair concentration and focus.
6. Use healthy fats – these are non-hydrogenated unsaturated or polyunsaturated fats which don't clog arteries and lead to improved cerebrovascular (brain blood flow) as well as cardiovascular effects. GOOD FATS: Olive oil, canola oil, peanut oil, and corn oil. BAD FATS: butter, coconut oil, palm oil, hydrogenated oils and others. Research does show that certain fats, such as omega-3 fatty acids, reduce inflammation and may help lower the risk of certain chronic diseases .Omega-3 fatty acids are highly concentrated in the brain and are important for cognitive performance and behavioral function. Taking an omega three fatty acid supplement may be beneficial. [To read more about fats and the role of omega three fatty acids in the diet go to this link.](#)
7. Eating healthy does NOT have to be boring or a battle especially with your teenager. The following books are specifically recommended for pre-teens and teens:

Chew on This by Eric Schlosser

The Omnivore's Dilemma by Michael Pollan (young reader's version)

Documentaries: Food Inc., Supersize Me, Fast Food Nation, Forks Over Knives, and FRESH – watch them as a family!

Websites:

[Younger Children](#)

[Adolescent Girls](#)

[Adolescent Boys](#)