

Special Diets for ASD

By Judith Aronson-Ramos, MD

You are what you eat was a popular expression in the 1970's. Throughout centuries foods have been used as medicine. No doubt, diet and the quality of what people consume matter in health and longevity. However, do we have the knowledge at this point in time to say with certainty a diet can "cure" Autism? At the present time, there isn't a single specialized diet proven to treat Autism Spectrum Disorders. There is **information** on the internet, in books, workshops, and promoted by physicians, researchers, and parents that in certain populations of children with autism spectrum disorders dietary changes do make a big difference in their children's lives. There is plenty of good reason to debate and scrutinize the pros and cons of these claims. What we can say with some certainty at this point is diets do matter for *some children* with autism, and diets do matter for the optimal functioning of all human beings. **However the extent to which dietary changes can make a difference in the lives of children with autism should not be overstated.**

Many of us in the field of treating children and adolescents in the autism spectrum know there is not one type of Autism, but **many Autisms**. Given this reality, where one child may respond to a dietary manipulation another may not. This is what parents will tell you as well. A casein and gluten free diet, soy free, and yeast free diet, or elimination diets of different kinds may have resulted in significant improvement for one family and imperceptible change for another. What the research shows at this point is that children with significant gastrointestinal problems – constipation, diarrhea, abdominal pain, irregularity – these children seem to benefit the most from dietary interventions. However there is no specific dietary intervention, including casein and gluten free, which has had rigorous science to back it up. There may be some research but it is generally not of sufficient quality to validate use of the diet by most medical professionals. Parents that want to trial different diets can and do, which is certainly their choice. However, my advice is to be sure your child has properly balanced nutrition – fats, carbohydrates, and proteins of good quality. Also be sure your child is not experiencing any psychological distress from feeling deprived of favorite foods. 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 ASD, and **this should be honored and respected when it is done wisely and safely.**

What we do know at this point is that some children are sensitive to specific foods, dyes, and preservatives. It also only makes sense that eating poorly - a lot of junk food, refined carbohydrates, and excessively processed foods - is not conducive to good physical or neurological health. What I recommend are certain practices of healthy eating which are not restrictive and may benefit the ASD 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, vegetable, 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. 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 – a turkey sandwich, even PBJ on whole grain bread, healthy lunch meats, tuna –sparingly, high protein pasta, bean burrito etc. It can be done! Schools 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. 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 Supplements and Nutrition section in Resources on this website.

7. Anti-oxidants in plentiful quantities in the form of fruits, vegetables, and beans. Here is the list of the top foods with the most anti-oxidant power: pinto and red beans, blueberries, cranberries, raspberries, strawberries, apples, pecans, plums, russet potatoes, and artichoke hearts. You will notice there is a lot of overlap with the super foods. Remember an anti-oxidant plays the role in the body of defending against inflammation and oxidative stress which can damage DNA and various cellular processes. Because we do not entirely know the mechanism of how and why ASD occurs, and there is the potential that immune mechanisms and problems with detoxification at the cellular level may play a role, it is reasonable to eat a diet rich in anti-oxidants.

8. Dietary enzyme supplements are popular with some families and their benefit has yet to be determined. I do not recommend them on a routine basis.

9. Dietary supplements will be discussed elsewhere as this area is complex, fraught with controversy, and loaded with extensive claims.