

# The Link Between ADHD and Nutrition

## Learn how a modified diet can minimize the symptoms of a common behavioral disorder.

By Jean Weiss for MSN Health & Fitness

Your child has a hard time sitting still in class, but you loathe the idea of having him take Ritalin and lose his sparkle. And yet, he does need to stop bouncing off the walls. Increasingly, parents are looking at their child's diet before turning to medication to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, known as ADHD.

Characterized by hyperactivity, impulsiveness, and the inability to focus, [ADHD is the most commonly diagnosed behavioral disorder in childhood](#), affecting from 3 percent to 5 percent of U.S. school-age children. [Most parents and physicians treat ADHD with medication](#)—in fact, the use of medication tripled worldwide between 1993 and 2003, with the United States prescribing more medication for ADHD than any other country. Yet some parents have taken a rigorous look at their child's diet, as a substitute for or in conjunction with meds, in an effort to minimize symptoms and ultimately sidestep a dependency on drugs.

Medication produces fast results and is preferred by many physicians, parents, and teachers. "It does improve behavior, it is easy, it is quick, but the problem is it doesn't heal anything," says clinical nutritionist Marcia Zimmerman, a former research scientist at Stanford University Medical Center and author of the book *The ADD Nutrition Solution: A 30-Day Drug-Free Plan*. "And moreover, when a child has been on these meds for a period of time it develops side effects and you have to use more drugs to relieve the side effects."

A nutrition approach takes longer to show results. "With dietary supplements you can see improvement in behavior in a week or two," says Zimmerman. ["A food approach is more of a long-term thing—a 30-day plan, for example."](#)

There are many ADHD-healing diets to choose from. The Feingold Method has sparked controversy because of its regimented program and recommendations that you steer clear of many foods—such as fruits—that are considered healthy by many nutritionists. Another option is elimination diets, in which parents take away multiple food categories and then reintroduce them one by one to see how they affect mood and behavior.

Whichever approach you choose, make sure the changes are realistic for your family and don't create additional stress as you attempt to follow them. "There are diets out there that are incredibly strict," says Bonnie Taub-Dix, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association with nutrition practices in Long Island and Manhattan. "Those diets could have credibility, but I would recommend picking some aspect of the diet—let's say sugar—and really watching that to see if your child has a change in behavior."

Zimmerman says it's OK to relax and let your child enjoy the food at a birthday party, for example, but she says it's easier for a child to adjust to a new, restricted diet when the whole family takes part.

The backbone of a food-based approach is stabilizing blood sugar levels and feeding the brain the right types of foods at the optimal times. Protein and whole grains are high on the list and recommended by both Zimmerman and Taub-Dix. Small healthy meals throughout the day regulate energy, and convert food into the glucose the brain needs to function.

"About 50 percent of what a child eats goes to feed their brain," Zimmerman says. "The brain's only fuel is sugar—glucose, not sucrose. We have to have a steady supply of glucose for the brain. If they get too much, [the ADHD child] can't handle it, if they don't get enough, they can't handle it. The theory is to supply the brain with glucose when they need it but also to supply protein. You want the messages between the brain cells to be activated at the right time."

A health care professional can help you find the nutrient mix that's best for your ADHD child. Both Taub-Dix and Zimmerman emphasize the importance of consulting a physician before taking a food-based approach. "Just like any illness, when your child needs medication it's important to give medication," says Taub-Dix.

And if a child is already taking meds, don't pull him off without a plan. "If a child is on meds, you have to work with a doctor," Zimmerman says. "It is possible to reduce a child's meds or alleviate some of the side effects, and it is even possible that diet and supplements could

remedy the situation. But when you are talking about medication, you want to make sure parents understand that you should not just stop them.”