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Gluten Free / Casein Free Diet

Dietary intervention for children with spectrum and attention disorders have historically been the subject of much debate. However, there is now convincing evidence that dietary intervention is of benefit for many children if it is strictly adhered to for 6 months.

As autism and ADHD are whole-body disorders involving systemic inflammation which affects brain function, the first step is to start your child on a diet that is nutrient dense and anti-inflammatory. A nutrient dense diet contains fruit, vegetables, grass fed meat, good fats such as avocado, coconut oil, ghee and duck fat. Ideally very little food that comes from a packet. Removal of the following food groups can improve behaviour, sleep digestive upset.

1. Artificial colorings, flavorings and preservatives
2. Sugar
3. Gluten, casein, and corn

Understanding gluten and casein

The gluten free, casein free (GF/CF) diet has been shown to be helpful for individuals with allergies to these foods and specifically in the management of ASD and ADHD. Proteins found in grain and dairy products, known as gluten and casein respectively, are believed to be poorly broken down in the digestive tracts in some people. When these proteins are not digested properly, they can be absorbed intact into blood circulation. These proteins can affect the brain by crossing the blood-brain barrier and binding to opioid receptors, which can affect mood, concentration, mental performance and pain.

In a survey of over 3500 parents of autistic children, it was reported that 70% found a GF/CF diet improved behaviour, eye contact, socialisation, concentration and learning. It is recommended to follow the GF/CF diet strictly for at least 6 months to assess the benefit of this diet.



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About gluten containing food

Foods containing gluten – avoid these – check the labels of all food you buy for these ingredients

- Wheat
- Rye
- Barley
- Kamut
- Triticale
- Spelt

These foods are generally made with grains containing gluten so avoid them unless they state “gluten free”:

- Breads, biscuits, flours, pasta, couscous
- Hot chips – they are usually coated with flour during manufacture
- Packet chips – check ingredients, plain kettle chips are usually OK
- Sauces – tomato, soy, Worcestershire, teriyaki, mint, salad dressings etc.
- Processed meat (GF is OK) such as bacon, ham, hot dogs, devon, chicken loaf
- Vinegar, mustard, vanilla unless gluten free
- Baking powder.
- Check labels

About casein containing food

Casein is the protein in all animal milk, including human milk. Foods to avoid - All dairy products including those made from the milk of goats and sheep. Foods to avoid:

- Any food that contains – caseinate, casein, whey, lactose, lactalbumin. (used as a natural flavour) For example things like – protein drinks, drinking chocolate, coffee
- Creamers – check label



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Picky eaters

Making dietary changes may seem overwhelming and even impossible, but with time and effort it is possible. A healthy nutritious diet is the foundation of treatment and future health so the effort will be worth it! Some children are so sensitive and disturbed by new foods that they just plainly refuse to eat any of the new foods on offer. If your child is in this situation put the new diet on hold and get them eating their old foods again. Once they are settled you can start again, but this time much slower.

Aim to remove casein (dairy) first and work on getting your child to accept almond or rice milk. Do this by putting a very small amount of the new milk in their existing milk, for example just 1 tsp, however small it must be for your child to begin to get used to the new taste and smell. As your child accepts this, gradually increase the amount of the new milk. With time, they will adjust to the new taste. Do your best to sneak in other foods in as best you can, starting with very small amounts. As gluten, casein and corn are removed, many children's palates will increase to some degree.

Make it fun experimenting with new foods. Try some gluten free bread (It tastes better toasted) cut it into soldiers that they can dip into soup, sauces and dip. This will help them get used to the feel of new foods. Be persistent, keep presenting new foods – it may take between 10-20 times of presenting a food before your child will feel comfortable and be interested.

It is possible that when foods are taken away, your child may have a withdrawal reaction, so be on the lookout for increased irritability, tantrums, aggression and increased craving for the food.



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Tips for the transition

- Start introducing new foods a little bit at a time. Always have something you know your child likes in this change over period.
- Make use of old containers. Eg put rice milk in the normal milk bottle. Use packaging of familiar items and put your homemade items in them.
- Use sauces that your child can dip foods into – apple, pear, apricot, pureed avocado with lemon juice and salt, homemade tomato sauce.
- Zinc is a critical mineral for many functions in the body, including taste. Deficiency has been found to be an issue for many kids with spectrum and attention disorders.
- Take treats with you when going out.
- Give Grandma/neighbor/school a list of “safe treats” ahead of time. That way, others can buy or make them themselves.
- Supply food substitutions quietly. If you don’t mention it, others won’t notice and your child won’t feel singled out.

Eat liberally

- Rice, buckwheat, quinoa, tapioca, sorghum, millet, teff and flours made from these grains.
- Coconut milk and flour
- Milk substitutes – rice, almond, nut and seed milks
- Cheese is the hardest to substitute, but there are lots of substitutes in the supermarket these days.
- Instead of butter use ghee, coconut oil, tahini, avocado, olive oil Fats – duck, goose, lard, ghee, coconut oil, avocado. Kids need fats for brain health
- Ice cream substitutes are coconut or cashew ice cream, also dairy free sorbets.
- Sweeteners – xylitol, stevia, raw honey, maple syrup.