

Curing vs. Fuelling an ADHD Brain

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Recently, clickbait articles and TikTok influencers have been promoting ADHD cures, including advising strict juice cleanses, expensive vitamins and supplements, cutting out gluten, sugar, or dairy, and/or following a vegan diet. Although these claims are tempting, these “cures” for ADHD are not supported by the research. While we can find ways to best support an ADHD brain and develop strategies that might reduce the impact that ADHD has on lives, there is currently no treatment that will “rid” your child of ADHD.

Myth: ADHD can be cured by improving my child’s nutrition, such as by going gluten free, eating a strict organic diet, and cutting out sugar and dairy. With these changes, I can cure my child’s ADHD and its symptoms.

Truth: There is currently no evidence that any specialized diet can cure ADHD, but there are many ways we can improve/optimize the functioning of an ADHD brain. Although consuming a healthy, balanced diet and providing the ADHD brain with proper nutrients is helpful, supporting an ADHD brain to perform at its best is a complex matter.

Fuelling the ADHD Brain

Although we cannot cure ADHD, changes in diet and nutrition, and making sure that your child is consuming a balanced, healthy diet is important to fuel their brain properly and help your child perform at their best. The way we fuel our bodies and brains is important for all of us, but it is even more so when managing ADHD symptoms:

Brains rely on carbohydrates for fuel. Making sure that your child consumes enough complex carbohydrates, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grain breads and pastas is an important part of giving the brain enough fuel to take on the day: these complex - or “slow” - carbohydrates take longer for the body to break down, providing energy to the brain and body for a longer period of time. Simple or “fast” carbohydrates are those that the body can process much more quickly - this means they provide fuel to the brain more quickly as well.

ADHD brains often have to work overtime to complete the same day-to-day tasks as brains without ADHD. *Before even leaving the house*, tasks that require executive functioning, such as brushing teeth, applying deodorant, packing a lunch, and otherwise getting out the door in the morning are all taxing for an ADHD brain. The ADHD brain often burns through its fuel at a quicker rate, which can lead to drastic mood swings and

emotional outbursts throughout the day. For example, it is more likely that we will see those unexpected “meltdowns” or “0-100” reactions when a brain is tired and has burned through its fuel (e.g., after a particularly difficult class, right before lunch, or when getting home from school).

In moments of emotional dysregulation (those “meltdowns” or “0-100” outbursts), giving sources of fast carbohydrates - such as sugary beverages or snacks - can get energy to your child’s brain more quickly, boosting their ability to emotionally regulate. Packing your child an extra juice box or sugary snack specifically for these moments can be a helpful way to manage these big emotions. If you are concerned about the way your child might use these sugary items at school, speak to your child’s teacher about how these are to be used. It can also be very helpful to have these sugary drinks and snacks on hand for writing tests and exam season, as your child’s brain will be working overtime and will benefit from the boost of energy!

Other ways of fuelling your child’s brain include getting enough good quality sleep every night and lots of physical activity each day, using medication as prescribed, and ensuring that your child gets enough “down time” throughout the day.

With the approach of Christmas and the holiday season, it is important to remember that sugar intake *has not been linked to hyperactivity*. If you notice your child is becoming less regulated over the winter break, it is more likely that their behavior is related to changes in their sleep schedule, reduced physical activity, and more excitement. To help your child(ren) stay regulated over the holiday season, try to maintain a regular sleep schedule and come up with ways to be active as a family!

Emerging Research

There have been studies that indicate that reducing or supplementing certain ingredients and food groups can reduce or eliminate ADHD symptoms. However, these studies have only shown that these effects are present when the individual has existing food sensitivities and/or allergies. Cutting out certain food groups will not impact ADHD symptoms if your child does not have sensitivities or allergies to that food. If you notice a connection between certain foods and increased symptoms in your child, speak to your physician regarding your concerns.

Some studies have come out that have found that lower levels of Omega-3s may be related to ADHD symptoms; however, the studied effects of supplementing with

Omega-3s have been typically minimal. If you are interested in adding Omega-3s to your child's diet (or any other supplements), speak to your physician about their recommendations for using over-the-counter supplements.

Additionally, there has been research on the connection between the gut microbiome and disorders such as ADHD and ASD. While this research is still in its early stages, if you have concerns about your child's gut health, speak to your physician.

What Parents Can Do to Help Support ADHD Brains

Exercise: encourage your child to find fun ways to incorporate exercise into their daily routine - it is recommended that children get 60 minutes of *moderate to vigorous* physical activity every day

Sleep: help your child develop a consistent bedtime routine and sleep schedule - children aged 5-13 should aim for 9-11 hours of sleep every night, while teens aged 14-17 should aim for 8-10 hours

Balanced Diet: provide your child with a variety of healthy and nutritionally balanced school snacks - letting your child pick their lunch foods and snacks might increase the likelihood of them eating a variety of foods

Sugary Drinks & Snacks: in addition to their regular meals and snacks, provide your child with "fast sugars" to have at school, during playdates, or when learning new skills (e.g., juice boxes, individually wrapped candies, or sugary fruit snacks!)

Psychoeducation: seek ongoing education about ADHD from reputable sources (see below!) and try out new strategies that are suggested - your child should be involved in this process so they can learn about themselves and be an active participant in their ADHD treatment plan!

Medication: administer ADHD medication as prescribed and discuss any changes or concerns with the prescribing doctor

Talk to Your Doctor: discuss any concerns regarding food sensitivities and allergies with your child's doctor

Summary

ADHD impacts each child and family in different ways. Learning how to best manage ADHD symptoms and support ADHD brains can be a complex process, involving a lot of trial and error. Current research has shown that the best way of treating ADHD symptoms includes a combination of medication and behavioral modifications, including consuming a healthy, balanced diet. While we cannot cure ADHD, the ways we fuel an ADHD brain can set our kids up for success and provide them the best chance at managing their ADHD symptoms. These ways will greatly improve their social,

educational, and eventual career outcomes, and allow them to grow into the best versions of themselves.

Resources

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/adhd-and-diet-what-you-need-to-know>

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/adhd-alternative-treatment-what-you-need-to-know>

<https://www.caddra.ca/public-information/parents/>