

Food For Thought – Nutritional Treatment of ADHD

Nutrition, as a treatment approach for ADHD, is one remedy getting lots of attention lately, and with good reason. There is solid research that shows that making specific nutritional changes can alleviate ADHD symptoms. In fact, in a 2009 research study done in Europe in which children were put on a very strict diet of only certain foods, 70% of the children tested stopped showing signs of ADHD (details in *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 18:12-19;2009, but we know you're curious – the foods were rice, turkey, lamb, “vegetables,” “fruits,” margarine, vegetable oil, tea, pear juice and water).

It's unlikely that either you or your children will be interested in that strict a diet! The point was made, though, that nutrition plays a significant role in the expression of ADHD symptoms. The Hallowell Center has for many years suggested that people modify their diets to help them with their ADHD, recommending the addition of fish oil, as well as protein at breakfast for an “easy” start.

“If we want the brain to function properly, we need to feed it properly,” says Dr. Ede of the Needham Hallowell Center. In addition to providing pharmacological evaluations, Dr. Ede offers nutrition consults to patients of all ages with ADHD.

We asked Dr. Ede, “How does changing our diet affect our behavior, mood and energy?” She explained that our brain is made of fat and protein, and therefore requires the right kinds of fats and proteins in order to accomplish all of the tasks it is responsible for, from concentration, to mood regulation, to the timing of our sleep/wake cycles. “The chemical neurotransmitters that brain cells use to communicate with each other are almost all made from amino acids (the building blocks of protein), so eating high-quality protein every

day is crucial.” But what is “high quality” protein? It turns out that the answer is pretty specific – animal proteins, such as chicken, turkey, salmon, and even naturally-raised red meats, like beef and pork. Dairy and vegetable proteins such as yoghurt, peanut butter, and soy are less desirable, because people are more likely to have sensitivities to these proteins (and soy has other issues in that it contains phytoestrogens, which can disrupt our hormonal balance, and phytic acid, which can reduce levels of healthy minerals in our bodies).

“I enjoy teaching people what a healthy diet really is. Learning the basics of healthy eating is important for all of us, but especially for those who have ADHD. There is so much misinformation and unnecessary confusion out there-- I think people will be surprised to see how simple the principles are, and how different they are from what most of us have been led to believe. In addition to providing general nutrition guidelines, I can also help people figure out which specific foods might be contributing to their ADHD symptoms,” says Dr. Ede. The children in the recent study saw significant declines in symptoms by eliminating some very common foods such as gluten (wheat protein) and casein (dairy protein) that many are sensitive to, but don’t realize it. We tend to think that food sensitivities will give us a rash or make us feel ill. In fact, for many, the only evidence of their food sensitivities may be ADHD symptoms. People with ADHD are more likely to have other conditions associated with food sensitivities, such as asthma, lactose intolerance, eczema, and recurrent sinus/ear infections.

What are other elements of good nutrition for those with ADHD? Omega-3 fatty acids are critical components of brain cell membranes; these special fatty acids are only found in certain foods that most of us do not eat much of, such as certain kinds of fatty fish and grass-fed beef. It goes without saying that we are all better off avoiding processed foods and artificial ingredients. Most importantly, diets high in carbohydrate, especially refined carbohydrate (like sugar and flour),

put our blood sugar and insulin levels on a roller-coaster, which causes brain chemistry to become unstable. Dr. Ede believes that one of the most important reasons why psychiatric disorders like ADHD are becoming more and more common is that our diet has changed dramatically, even in the past generation, and our bodies have simply not adapted very well to our modern diet.

Despite evidence that suggests that eating a healthy diet can result in better brain function in less than two weeks, less than half of the adults she counsels about this treatment option are willing or able to make dietary changes. Dr. Ede understands that change is difficult, so she offers ways to ease clients into new habits. Simple things like taking Omega-3 fatty acid supplements, avoiding chemical additives and cutting down on refined carbohydrates like sugar and flour are excellent first steps.

If there is a child in the family with ADHD, it is helpful to take a “whole family approach” to dietary changes so that the child will feel supported and not feel singled out. The nutritional changes recommended for people with ADHD are good for all of us, whether we have ADHD or not, and it is never too early to begin modeling a healthy diet for our children. The challenge for parents of school-aged children is to figure out how to help their child avoid unhealthy foods at school. It can be helpful to try a new diet during a school vacation to get some practice with it before trying it at school.

Dr. Ede will be offering a 90 minute lecture titled ***Food for Thought: Managing the Symptoms of ADHD with Good Nutrition*** at the Hallowell Center in Sudbury on Tuesday, June 8 from 6:30-8:00 p.m. Call Rebecca at 978. 287. 0810 x117 to register for this informative and life-changing discussion. Dr. Ede also provides individualized nutrition consultations by phone. Call the Needham Hallowell Center for more information on phone consultations. The number is 781-726-6698.

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