



Beverly H. Rohman

## **Diet, Nutrition and ADHD**

You are what you eat! How many times have you heard that and wondered what to do with that information. Dr. Edward M. Hallowell, noted child and adult psychiatrist, writes that “the most potent medication we have is also our most dangerous and abused drug ---food. Consumed properly, food can aid in the treatment of all diseases and prevent many of them from developing in the first place. Consumed improperly, food directly leads to our most common killers, like heart disease, diabetes, stroke, obesity, and high blood pressure --- and it influences the course of ADHD and learning.”

The study of how nutrition affects the brain and behavior is relatively new. Scientists have just begun to understand how changes in particular nutrients alter the brain and how these neural changes then affect intelligence, mood, motivation and mental performance. A healthy diet is important for all children and adults, but it is critical in the treatment of those with ADHD to maximize their concentration, learning capacity, and self-control.

The study on *Diet, ADHD and Behavior*, conducted in 1999, stated that “ignoring or denying (or exaggerating) the effect of diet on behavior is not helpful to children and their families. The federal government, the food industry, organizations concerned about children with behavioral problems, and psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers should recognize that diet sometimes can help children who have behavioral problems.”

The possibility that food additives and natural food constituents could affect children’s behavior, especially those with ADHD, was first raised by Benjamin Feingold, a California allergist, in the mid 1970’s. Since then, numerous studies have been conducted that test and question the effect of nutrition and mental health. Most of the studies involve children. But, there is no magic moment where nutrition suddenly doesn’t matter.

Denying that food ingredients can exacerbate ADHD or other behavioral affects reflects ignorance of the scientific research, and ignoring that research jeopardizes a person’s well being. Behavioral problems such as hyperactivity, learning disabilities, mental illness, aggressive and antisocial behavior, and juvenile delinquency have been purportedly linked to the potential influence of foods or nutrients. There is evidence of the relationship between food and behavior in children and adolescents. A diet of junk food can junk up your brain, as things like trans fats and saturated fats, common in heavily processed foods, can negatively affect the brain's synapses. Synapses connect the brains neurons and are important to learning and memory.

Along with many other factors, this knowledge highlights the implications for practitioners that are important to consider in the assessment of the relationship between diet and behavior.

Unfortunately, nutritional factors have largely been neglected by the major mental health providers outside of the field of eating disorders. Despite the lack of nutritional training in graduate and medical schools, there is an ever growing body of evidence that nutrition significantly influences the development and treatment of mental health and learning problems. Especially overlooked in these studies is the role of nutrition and allergies with regard to adult ADD, depression and anxiety.

Why are there so many nutritional deficiencies? In *The ADD Nutrition Solution*, clinical nutritionist Marcia Zimmerman, former research scientist at Stanford University Medical Center, tells us that one reason is that modern farming practices and food processing destroys nutrients ...and nutrients are lost as food sits around on the shelf. In addition, people are eating substances that the human race did NOT evolve eating over the last million years. Did our cave-dwelling ancestors feed their children fruit-rollups, store-bought cookies and muffins, candy, soda, frozen waffles and kid's cereals? Oh course not! Our ancestors ate very lean meats and fish, roots, greens, berries and nuts, with few grains, if any. "Kid foods" are especially bad and are just full of sugar, refined wheat, artificial hydrogenated oils, and food colors. ... Did you know that artificial food colors are made from petroleum? It is not that hard to eat real food. Avoid buying processed foods. Buy meat, fish, vegetables, fruits, whole wheat, olive oil, canola oil, and buy real ingredients such as real vanilla rather than vanillin and real maple syrup rather than the imitation. Think "REAL," buy organic when possible, and read labels!

Another key finding is the benefit of Omega-3 fatty acids on the function of the brain and positive impact on ADHD. Fatty acids are used to make brain and nerve tissue in the body and are crucial for proper growth, mental function, the immune system and brain development. While all children with ADHD are not deficient in fatty acids, research has shown that children with deficiencies have more problems with behavior, learning and general health. Child psychiatrist Dr. Kenny Handelman, believes that "natural treatments – specifically Omega-3 fatty acids may help unlock those secrets to why the brain fails to function properly all the time."

While the influences of diet and nutrition upon "physical" health are increasingly accepted, the influences of diet on "mental" health still remain somehow uncertain in the minds of most professionals. Many experts agree that there is no conclusive, beyond-a-shadow-of-a-doubt proof that diet influences ADHD, but, the benefits --- of eating healthy, without preservatives, with less sugar, and with particular care to proper nutrients that feed the brain --- are overwhelming. What you eat really can make a difference!

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