Can Food Allergies & Diet Be The Cause of Behavioral Problems?

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Linking ADD, ADHD, OCD, & Hyperactivity to Diet

Attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a chronic disorder of the central nervous system that affects one's ability to maintain attention. It is currently one of the most commonly diagnosed behavioral disorders in children. This is an important problem to address in schools, since children who suffer from ADHD have difficulty maintaining attention and controlling their activity levels. In addition, children with ADHD have difficulty starting and finishing work, memorizing facts, focusing and controlling emotions.

Whenever causes of and treatment for ADD/HD are discussed, diet is part of the conversation. While many parents and teachers feel strongly about the link between ADD/HD and diet, research shows mixed results. Recent research on the diet-behavior connection has not only looked into what is in our food that might trigger or worsen ADD/HD, but also what might be deficient in the diets of those with ADD/HD.

There is quite a bit of conflicting information on the subject of food allergies contributing to ADD/HD. There are many parents who believe that dietary changes helped their ADD child, but **most doctors deny that food allergies or sensitivities** can cause the behaviors linked with ADD. I have seen in my own practice many children who have experienced reduced symptoms of ADD/HD after some very simple dietary changes and food sensitivity eliminations. Studies as far back as the 1940's show that some children and adults definitely react to certain food colors, especially **Yellow #5 (Tartrazine).**

Below are some additional areas to consider:

- **Food Dyes, Preservatives, and Other Additives**

Research on diet and ADD/HD first began in the 1970s when **pediatrician Ben Feingold** claimed that ADD/HD, among other behavioral and health problems, could be improved by the **elimination of certain food additives.** Two recent studies that have looked at specific additives and preservatives, and their results are noteworthy. Results showed that these additives, when given during the critical development stages, affect growth of cells in the brain. A second study, looking at the effect of food colorings and the preservative **sodium benzoate** on hyperactivity in three year old children, showed significant reductions in hyperactive behavior when the additives were removed from their diet.

- **Sugar and Caffeine**

Too much sugar and/or caffeine can greatly contribute to ADD and Hyperactivity in children. It may over stimulate their mind and their bodies to act out control and prevent the ability to focus. It can also have the reverse effect and cause them to be overly sluggish.

- **Mercury**

According to a 2004 study, exposure to the mercury-based vaccine additive, thimerosal, may increase the risk of Autism and ADHD. More specifically, researchers have found

that exposure to thimerosal, along with other substances, interrupts processes that are critical to proper brain development in infants and children. While this does not mean that mercury, thimerosal, or mercury-based vaccines are the cause of ADHD, it raises a red flag that has driven the creation of **mercury-free** forms of the routinely recommended vaccines for children.

- **Essential fatty acids (EFA's)**

Essential fatty acid deficiency has been linked to poor brain function and mental health problems. Studies show that children who have **deficiencies in omega-3 fatty acids** have more behavioral, learning, and health problems than do children who don't. The symptoms of essential fatty acid deficiency are all also common in ADD/HD children. It is possible that children with behavior and attention problems are misdiagnosed with ADD/HD when they actually have a simple nutrient deficiency or food allergy.

- **Magnesium**

Some children with ADD/HD have low levels of magnesium. At least two studies have shown significant improvement in behavior with magnesium supplementation. It is important to note, that it is difficult to measure improvement in behavior, and most studies rely on reports from parents.

- **Zinc**

Studies show that Zinc deficiency may contribute to hyperactivity and impaired concentration. Recent research has found that **only 65 percent of patients with ADHD had normal zinc levels**. While this does not mean that low zinc causes ADHD, zinc deficiency may intensify the symptoms. One small study reported that children with ADHD who took zinc supplements along with their ADHD medications had greater improvement than those who took medication alone.

After reading many books, studies, and working with many clients, I am convinced that some people (not just kids!) are reacting to foods and food additives by exhibiting ADD/HD behavior. Not all, but some.

Who is most likely to be reacting to a food?

-People with Allergies (consistent stuffy nose, eczema, asthma, bronchitis)
-People who often do not feel well or who are depressed
-Kids whose moods are up and down all the time, who seem happy one moment and suddenly, become insanely nasty, out of control, or violent
-Kids with dark circles under their eyes ("allergy circles")
-Kids who were colicky past the age of four months and were unhappy babies
-Kids with chronic sleeping problems
-Kids/People with recurrent infections (ear, chest, sinus)

What kind of reactions have been seen in children? ***(Note: adults react too!)***

-Hyperactivity
-Trouble sleeping
-Tantrums, aggressive behavior, screaming
-Whining, crying, not feeling well
-Poor handwriting
-Very tiny handwriting
-Inability to concentrate
-Dyslexia
-Digestive issues (bloating, belching, gagging, vomiting, constipation, nausea, gas)
-Headaches
-Wheezing, runny or itchy nose, scratchy eyes, coughing
-Depression or anxiety
-Senseless talk
-Recurrent infections: ear, chest, sinus

-Bright red earlobes, red patches on cheeks
-Dark circles, wrinkles and/or bags under the eyes
-Eczema, hives, rashes

Here are some food ingredients and foods that may contain allergens or cause sensitivities in some people:

- Artificial coloring
- Artificial flavoring
- Preservatives
- Food additives
- Uncultured dairy/milk
- Sugar (especially high fructose corn syrup)
- Corn
- Wheat
- Peanuts
- Soy

In addition, here are some environmental allergens that may also contribute to ADD/HD or behavioral problems in children:

- Dust
- Molds
- Pollen
- Chemical odors

Finally, there are other foods, such as bananas, apples, grapes, and tomatoes that may also contain allergens or cause sensitivities in some people.

An elimination diet excludes the major foods that you or your child is sensitive to. For the first week you eliminate all of the "forbidden" foods. After that you eat a large amount of one of the forbidden foods each day and carefully record any reactions.

A quick allergy test can often identify some of the items you are allergic to. Just remember, that this is a STARTING point only. Finding out what you or your child is allergic to can very easily take months of careful dietary adjustments and food tracking.

You'll be amazed how you can have your child or yourself back to feeling normal again!

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For a 30 minute complimentary 'get acquainted' phone session today at (631)428-2427 to see how we can help you and your child eliminate their food allergies.