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Share the Wellness Tip

Do Some Foods Make for Fidgeting?

Some scientists believe that allergies and sensitivities to certain foods, such as those containing artificial dyes, can cause hyperactivity in some children. But many experts are skeptical.

Part of the problem is that many of the studies on this topic included a small number of children or only lasted a short time. Also, most studies targeted children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These children can be extremely hyperactive, inattentive, or impulsive. It can be hard to know whether results from these studies can be applied to healthy children who are sometimes unruly.

How Sweet it is

Several studies report that some children with ADHD exhibit fewer symptoms when put on special diets. These diets often start by cutting out foods with artificial additives and sugars. Some diets also suggest eliminating possible allergens, such as wheat or milk.

What about sugar? The idea that refined sugar causes ADHD or makes symptoms worse is popular, but more research discounts this theory than supports it. In one study, researchers gave children foods containing either sugar or a sugar substitute every other day. The children who received sugar showed no different behavior or learning capabilities than those who received the sugar substitute. Another study in which children were given higher than average amounts of sugar or sugar substitutes showed similar results.

In another study, children who were considered sugar-sensitive by their mothers were given the sugar substitute aspartame, also known as NutraSweet. Although all the children got aspartame, half their mothers were told their children were given sugar, and the other half were told their children were given aspartame. The mothers who thought their children had gotten sugar rated them as more hyperactive than the other children and were more critical of their behavior, compared to mothers who thought their children received aspartame.

The Dangers of Restricted Diets

Until more is known, parents should be cautious about putting a child on a special diet without first talking to a doctor. It can't hurt to cut back on sugary or processed foods in a child's diet. These often contain artificial dyes and additives and few nutrients. But restricting important foods can lead to poor nutrition and a higher risk of disease. For instance, cutting out milk eliminates an important source of calcium, which helps build strong bones.

Some research also suggests that diets low in certain nutrients-such as iron, zinc, and vitamins A, B6, B12, C, and E may even trigger behavior problems. A healthy, well-balanced diet that includes all of the major food groups, including fruits, vegetables, dairy, and whole grains should provide adequate amounts of these nutrients.

Sources: National Institutes of Health, Psychology Today

