

# Eat This, Avoid That!

## 9 Food Rules for ADHD Families

*A well-rounded diet can improve ADD symptoms — including focus, hyperactivity, and impulsivity — in both children and adults. Here's what you should (and absolutely should not) be eating to help your brain and body.*

**by Tana Amen, RN, BSN**

The right diet can have a powerful, positive effect on your cognition, mood, memory, and behavior. The wrong diet can worsen ADD symptoms.

In two studies done in Holland, Lidy Pelsser, Ph.D., demonstrated that an elimination diet (eliminating sugar, gluten, dairy, eggs, certain meats, and food dyes) improved symptoms in 70 percent of children with ADD. (That was without eating some of the powerful brain-focusing foods that I will tell you about later.) As someone who knows what it's like to grow up in an ADD household filled with drama, this little food fact got my attention.

Everything you put on the end of your fork matters. When you eat to improve your health, you improve the quality of your life. Food impacts neurotransmitter levels of serotonin and dopamine, which play a big role in how you feel and perceive the world. Serotonin, for instance, is responsible for mood, sleep regulation, and appetite control.

When levels of this neurotransmitter drop, the results can be depression, anxiety, and negativity. This may be why we crave carbohydrates such as pasta, bread, and chocolate, all of which raise serotonin levels temporarily. Complex carbs, such as apples and sweet potatoes, work the same magic, but don't set you up for more cravings.

Likewise, dopamine helps to increase focus and motivation. Eating small amounts of protein throughout the day can boost dopamine and stabilize blood sugar.

It is critical to make sure that the food you eat is loaded with nutrients that your body is able to properly digest and absorb. At the Amen Clinic, we created nine simple food guidelines to help you heal your brain and body.

### **Rule 1: Eat high-quality calories, but not too many**

The quality of your food affects how your brain and body work. Try to eat high-quality food, and be careful with calories. Impulsivity leads many people diagnosed with ADD to eat the wrong things too often. In fact, impulsivity is associated with obesity, which has been shown to be bad for the brain. Eat only high-quality calories. One cinnamon roll contains 720 calories and a small quiche more than 1,000 calories while a 400-calorie salad made of spinach, salmon, blueberries, apples, walnuts, and red bell peppers will increase your energy and, maybe, make you smarter.

It's not as simple as calories in, calories out. Some calories adversely affect your hormones, your taste buds, and your health. Eating sugar and processed food, even in small amounts, leads to craving more food and feeling less energetic. You can eat more if you eat healthy, high-quality food that gives you energy and turns on the hormones that affect metabolism.

## Rule 2: Drink plenty of water

Your brain is 80 percent water. Anything that dehydrates it, such as too much caffeine or alcohol, impairs your cognition and judgment. Drink plenty of water every day.

To know whether you are drinking enough water for your brain, a good general rule is to drink half your weight in ounces per day. If you are significantly obese, don't drink more than 120 ounces a day. If you are an athlete, make sure to replenish electrolytes after the game or working out. Cutting out sugary drinks and juice eliminates about 400 calories a day from the average American diet. That allows you to either eat more healthy food or eliminates a lot of calories, if you are trying to shed pounds.

## Rule 3: Eat high-quality, lean protein

It is important to start each day with protein to boost your focus and concentration. Protein helps balance your blood sugar, increases focus, and gives your brain the necessary building blocks for brain health. Think of it as medicine, and take it in small doses. Recent studies show that consuming large amounts of protein at one time can cause oxidative stress (a problem that burdens your body and brain), making you feel sick.

Great sources of protein include wild fish, skinless turkey or chicken, beans (eat them like a condiment, not too often or too much), raw nuts, and vegetables such as broccoli and spinach. I use spinach instead of lettuce in my salads for a nutrition boost. Protein powders can also be a good source, but read the labels. Whey protein contains casein, which is an excitotoxin in the brain, and can be overly stimulating for some people. Many companies put sugar and other unhealthy ingredients in their powders. My personal preference is pea and rice protein blends.

## Rule 4: Eat smart carbs

Eat carbohydrates that do not spike your blood sugar and are high in fiber, such as those found in vegetables and fruits, like blueberries and apples. Carbohydrates are not the enemy; they are essential to your health. Bad carbohydrates — ones that have been stripped of nutritional value, such as sugar and simple carbs — are the problem.

Sugar is not your friend. It increases inflammation in your body (which leads to inflammation in the brain, as well) and erratic brain cell firing. Sugar is addictive, and perhaps plays a role in aggression. In a recent study, children who were given sugar every day showed a significantly higher risk for violence later in life. The less sugar in your life, the better your life will be.

Get to know the Glycemic Index (GI). It rates carbohydrates according to their effects on blood sugar. Carbs are ranked on a scale of one to 100+ (glucose is 100). Low-glycemic foods, as you would imagine, have a lower number. This means they do not spike your blood sugar, and are generally healthier for you. High-glycemic foods have a higher number; they quickly elevate your blood sugar, and are not as healthy for you. In general, I like to stay with foods that have a GI rating under 60.

Eating a diet that is filled with low-glycemic foods will lower your blood glucose levels, decrease cravings, and help you focus.

When eating carbs, choose those that are high in fiber. Experts recommend eating 25 to 35 grams of fiber a day, but studies suggest that most people fall short of that. Boost your fiber by eating lots of vegetables and a little fruit. Think of legumes as you would a condiment. You can add fiber to smoothies, but don't use grain-based fiber. My favorite types of fiber supplements are inulin or glucomannan. When reading a food label, you want to look for more than 5 grams of fiber and fewer than 5 grams of sugar per serving.

## Rule 5: Focus on healthy fats

Good fats are essential to your health. Essential fatty acids are called "essential" for a reason. The solid weight of your brain is 60 percent fat (after all the water is removed). When the medical establishment recommended that we eliminate fat from our diets, we got fat.

You want to eliminate bad fats from your diet — trans fats, fried fats, and fat from cheaply raised, industrially farmed animals that are fed corn and soy. Fats found in pizza, ice cream, and cheeseburgers fool the brain into ignoring the signals that tell your brain that you are full. They disrupt the hormones that send those signals to your brain. Focus on healthy fats, especially those that contain omega-3 fatty acids, found in foods like salmon, sardines, avocados, walnuts, chia seeds, and dark green leafy vegetables.

## Rule 6: Eat from the rainbow

Eat foods that reflect the colors of the rainbow, such as blueberries, pomegranates, yellow squash, and red bell peppers. They boost the antioxidant levels in your body and help keep your brain young.

I'm not talking about Skittles, jelly beans, or M&Ms. Nor do I mean grape jelly, mustard (which contains food dye and sometimes gluten), or ketchup, which is loaded with sugar. These highly processed, sugar-filled foods have no place in your pantry if you are trying to use food to heal your brain.

## Rule 7: Cook with herbs and spices

Some herbs and spices are so powerful that you could keep them in your medicine cabinet instead of your kitchen cabinet.

- Turmeric, found in curry, contains a chemical that has been shown to decrease the plaque in the brain thought to be responsible for Alzheimer's disease.
- In three studies, a saffron extract was found to be as effective as antidepressant medication in treating people with major depression.
- Scientific evidence has shown that rosemary, thyme, and sage help boost memory.
- Cinnamon has been shown to help improve attention and blood sugar regulation. It is high in antioxidants and is a natural aphrodisiac.
- Garlic and oregano boost blood flow to the brain.
- The hot spicy taste of ginger, cayenne, and black pepper comes from gingerols, capsaicin, and piperine, compounds that help boost metabolism.

## Rule 8: Make sure your food is clean

Whenever you can, eat organically grown or raised foods. Pesticides used in commercial farming can accumulate in your brain and body, even though the levels in each food may be low. Also, eat hormone-free, antibiotic-free meat from animals that are free-range and grass-fed. Grass-fed bison and beef are 30 percent lower in palmitic acid — the saturated fat associated with heart disease — than industrially raised beef (fed corn, soy, and pharmaceuticals, and restricted in movement).

It is critical to know and understand what you are eating. You are not only what you eat, you are also what the animals you eat ate. In addition, eliminate food additives, preservatives, and artificial dyes and sweeteners. To do so, start reading food labels. If you do not know what is in a food item or product, don't eat it. Would you buy something if you did not know how much it cost?

Fish is a great source of healthy protein and fat, but it is important to know about the mercury levels in fish. Here are a couple of general rules to guide you: 1) The larger the fish, the more mercury it probably contains, so go for smaller varieties. 2) From the safe fish choices, eat a variety of fish, preferably those highest in omega-3s, like wild Alaskan salmon, sardines, anchovies, and Pacific halibut.

Be mindful of pesticide levels in fruits and vegetables. Foods with the highest levels are: celery, peaches, apples, blueberries, sweet bell peppers, cucumbers, cherries, collard greens, kale, grapes, green beans, strawberries, nectarines, spinach, potatoes.

Foods with the lowest levels of pesticide residues are: onions, pineapple, sweet peas (frozen), cabbage, mushrooms, eggplant, avocado, kiwi fruit, broccoli, watermelon, cantaloupe, sweet corn (frozen), asparagus, bananas, papaya, grapefruit.

## **Rule 9: Eliminate problem foods**

If you're having trouble with focus, mood, energy, memory, weight, blood sugar, or blood pressure, eliminate the foods that might be causing trouble, especially wheat and any other gluten-containing grain or food, dairy, soy, and corn.

Did you know that gluten makes some people emotionally unstable? There are reports of people having psychotic episodes when they're exposed to gluten. When these people eliminate wheat and other gluten sources, their stomachs and brains function better.

We have many stories of patients who lose weight and improve symptoms of brain fog, irritability, eczema, and irritable bowel syndrome when they eliminate gluten from their diet.

One of our patients became violent whenever he ate MSG. What's worse, MSG is not required to be listed on a label unless it is a single food additive. It can be disguised by being added in with other ingredients.

Children with ADHD and autism often feel and behave better when we put them on elimination diets that get rid of wheat, dairy, processed foods, sugar and sugar alternatives, food dyes, and additives.

***Excerpted from the Healing ADD Through Food Cookbook (CD-ROM), by TANA AMEN, RN, BSN.  
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