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Gluten-Free Diet and Autistic Children

by Thaashida L. Hutton, M.S., CCC-SLP

What is a Gluten-Free Diet?

A gluten-free diet is a special diet that eliminates foods that contain or are made from the protein gluten. Wheat, barley, rye, and oats contain gluten and should be avoided. Gluten-free diets are sometimes used as an alternative intervention method for autistic children. This diet may help with digestion, as well as some characteristics of autism, such as difficulty with communication and social skills.

Where Do I Start?

Experts recommend a three-month gluten-free diet trial period for children younger than age three and for a six-month period after age three. Introduce this diet gradually, especially with younger children. Very young children are more likely than older children to experience severe withdrawal reactions when placed on the diet suddenly. Parents' knowledge of the ingredients in their grocery cart is very important. Parents can purchase gluten-free cookbooks to learn how to cook without gluten and still provide adequate nutrition for their child.



What Theory Supports a Gluten-Free Diet?

Although not proven, some experts believe that many autistic children often have difficulty digesting foods that contain gluten. These undigested proteins turn into substances that act as opiates or drugs which may affect brain development and behavior. Some possible results of a gluten-free diet are:



- Decrease in impulsive behaviors (yelling, shouting, or screaming)



- Increase in attention span (able to focus on a task or activity for an increased period of time)



- Decrease in sensory sensitivities (refusing to touch anything wet or refusing to eat anything crunchy)



- Decrease in aggression (getting into physical fights)

Does This Diet Work?

While there are no significant differences in behavior between children on a gluten-free diet and children on regular diets, many parents report improvement in behavior after their children are on a gluten-free diet. Currently, there is not enough evidence to support or oppose the use of this diet as an intervention method for autistic children.



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What Are Some Foods That My Child Can and Cannot Eat on This Diet?

Can Eat

- Fresh meats (not breaded/battered)
- Fresh fruits/vegetables
- Rice, rice crackers
- Corn meal/starch
- Potato starch
- Soy
- Beans
- Most milk products



Cannot Eat

- Wheat, wheat germ, semolina
- Oats, oat flour
- Barley, barley flour
- Rye
- Malt flavoring
- Most gravies, soups, sauces



What are Possible Side-Effects?

- Weight gain or loss
- Poor vitamin status
- High cholesterol
- Constipation or diarrhea

It is important for parents to think about the benefits, which have not been proven, of a gluten-free diet before putting forth the effort to maintain such a diet. Parents must also consider the effects this change may have on the child and family members. Parents should consult a physician or dietitian for advice on adequate nutritional supplements. Look for online sources for gluten-free cooking ingredients as well.



Resources:

Autism Network for Dietary Intervention. (2008). Retrieved October 23, 2008, from <http://www.autismndi.com/news/display.asp?content=Resources&shownews=20040721151343>

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Gluten-Free Diet Guide for Families. (2005). Retrieved October 23, 2008, from <http://www.celiachealth.org/pdf/GlutenFreeDietGuideWeb.pdf>

Healing Thresholds-Connecting Community and Science to Heal Autism. Retrieved October 23, 2008, from <http://autism.healingthresholds.com/therapy/gluten-free-diet>

Lewis, L. (1998). Special Diets For Special Kids. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons. Side Effects of the Gluten-Free Diet. Retrieved October 23, 2008, from <http://celiacdisease.about.com/od/medicalguidelines/a/DietSideEffects.htm>

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