

Gluten-Free Diet and Children with Autism

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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 children with autism. 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 children with autism 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 children with autism.

What Are Possible Side-Effects?

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



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

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 dietician 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>

Cass, H., Gringas, P., March, J., McKendrick, I., O'Hare, A.E., Owen, C., and Pollin, C. (2008). "Absence of urinary opioid peptides in children with autism". *Archives of Disease in Childhood*. London, UK: BMJ Publishing Group Ltd & Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health.

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>

Helpful Products

The list of Super Duper® products below may be helpful when working with children who have autism. Visit www.superduperinc.com or call 1-800-277-8737. Click the links below to see the product description.

"I Have Autism" A Child's First Look at Autism Book and CD-ROM

Ask for item #BK-329 <http://www.superduperinc.com/products/view.aspx?pid=BK329>

Magnetic Meal Time MagneTalk® Game

Ask for item #SAS-134 <http://www.superduperinc.com/products/view.aspx?pid=SAS134&stid=>

Mini Textured Massager

Ask for item #OM-518 <http://www.superduperinc.com/products/view.aspx?pid=OM518&stid=>

Sensory Diet Cards™

Ask for item #CRD-33 <http://www.superduperinc.com/products/view.aspx?pid=CRD33>