



Many learning and behavior problems begin in your grocery cart!



Did you know that the brand of ice cream, cookie, and potato chip you select could have a direct effect on the behavior, health, and ability to learn for you or your children? Numerous studies show that certain synthetic food additives can have serious learning, behavior, and/or health effects for sensitive people, and also that food allergies and other food reactions can affect attention and learning in sensitive children.

It is safe and cheap to try eliminating certain foods and additives (especially when compared to taking medications for attention deficit and hyperactivity,) so it is a reasonable first step to take before drug treatment for attention deficit disorder, or to add if drug treatment has already been begun. Try this for at least 2 weeks.

We recommend eliminating:

- Artificial (synthetic) coloring
- Artificial (synthetic) flavoring
- Aspartame (NutraSweet, an artificial sweetener)
- Artificial (synthetic) preservatives BHA, BHT, TBHQ, benzoate
- Fragrances and non-food items which contain the chemicals listed

The easiest way to avoid most of these things is to cook from scratch rather than using foods from boxes and cans.

Where do food dyes come from?

Those pretty colors that make the "fruit punch" red, the gelatin green and the oatmeal blue are made from petroleum (crude oil) which is also the source for gasoline. You will find them on the ingredient labels, listed as "Yellow No. 5," "Red 40," "Blue #1," etc. The label may say "FD&C" before the number. That means "Food, Drug & Cosmetics." When you see a number listed as "D&C" in a product, such as "D&C Red #33" it means that this coloring is considered safe for medicine (drugs) and cosmetics, but not for food.

What are artificial flavorings?

They are combinations of many chemicals, both natural and synthetic. An artificial flavoring may be composed of hundreds of separate chemicals, and there is no restriction on what a company can use to flavor food. One source for imitation vanilla flavoring (called "vanillin") is the waste product of paper mills. Some companies built factories next to the pulp mills to turn the undesirable by-product into imitation flavoring, widely used in many cookies, candies and other foods.

What are BHA, BHT and TBHQ?

Those initials stand for three major preservatives found in many foods, especially in the United States. Like the dyes, they are made from petroleum (crude oil). Often, they are not listed in the ingredients. These chemicals may be listed as "anti-oxidants" because they prevent the fats in foods from "oxidizing" or becoming rancid (spoilage). There are many natural, beneficial anti-oxidants, but they are much more expensive than the synthetic versions.

There are other undesirable food additives (MSG, sodium benzoate, nitrites, sulfites, to name a few) that have been shown to cause problems ranging from migraines to behavior problems in susceptible people.

Food Allergies

For children who do not respond to a diet eliminating these food additives, it may be worth trying an "oligo-antigenic diet:" multiple studies have shown benefit from this approach. They generally start with a very limited diet: (two types of meats (lamb, turkey), two carbohydrate sources (rice, potatoes), two types of vegetables (any cabbage, carrots), and two fruits (apple, banana). Other than this, only salt, water, apple juice and mineral oil are allowed. This only needs to be tried for a week or two. If your child's behavior improves on a diet like this, you can slowly add back other foods to figure out which one your child is sensitive to. Talk to your provider about other strategies for an elimination diet.

Environmental Exposures

Other chemicals have also been shown to be associated with attention deficit disorder, including phthalates and BPA (from plastic products, personal care products, etc.), pesticides, PFC's (from nonstick pans, microwave popcorn, stain resistance treatments, and so on) and even the exhaust from gas appliances. Talk to your provider or check out healthychild.org to learn more about keeping your child safe.

Some supplements and natural products for help with Attention Deficit Disorder:

Iron

Iron helps attention deficit symptoms in children with iron deficiency (including children who were not anemic.) Ask your provider for a ferritin test.

Omega-3 fats

Fish oil has been proven to help children with ADD. Dosages studied have included 558 mg EPA and 174 mg DHA per day. Treatment should be continued for at least 6 months.

Zinc

Zinc may improve response to stimulant medications. (Zinc sulfate 55 mg/day). If using this long-term, give a multivitamin including copper as well.

Pycnogenol

A preliminary study suggests pycnogenol may also improve hyperactivity and concentration. The dose studied was 1 mg per kg of body weight (i.e. 30 mg for a 70-lb child.) Grape seed extract is a less expensive source.