

Dietary Interventions for Children with Autism

By Muriel Zober Hecht

My son Daniel was diagnosed with autism when he was 18 months old. At that time, he had no language and made few sounds. The only word he understood was “no.”

During the next three years my husband and I traveled around the country trying various educational, medical, dietary, nutritional and other approaches to help Daniel. One of the first professionals we consulted was a nutritionist. She suggested removing dairy products from Daniel’s diet. Within a few days, he started babbling for the first time.

We were so encouraged by Daniel’s response that we went on to pursue dietary interventions as vigorously as educational programming. We eventually removed gluten (wheat and related products), tomatoes, corn, soy, chocolate, peanuts and yeast from Daniel’s diet.

After six years on a rigid diet, Daniel can now tolerate occasional “cheating” on weekends and vacations. But if he cheats for several days in a row, he gets eczema, sleeps poorly and is more agitated and withdrawn than usual. He has the same response to eating too much sugar. Daniel describes the feeling as being “wild in the head.”

Today, at age ten, Daniel is an honor roll student in a general education classroom with an aide. He has limited spoken language, but he communicates extremely well through writing. Without his restricted diet, I doubt that Daniel would be able to remain calm and focused enough to successfully participate in a normal classroom.

Dietary Interventions

Many children with autism have multiple food allergies and show great improvement with dietary interventions. Autistic children may be especially sensitive to casein (milk products) and gluten. It appears that they are unable to completely digest these foods, leaving a by-product that acts like an opiate. This leads to a dull mind and an agitated body.

For some children, removing these products can produce dramatic results in just a few days. For others, results are more subtle and take longer to appear. When the diets work, parents report reductions in aggression, tantrums and self-stimulatory behavior like flapping and spinning. Parents also see improvements in language, sleep, concentration, social skills, eczema, intestinal problems and toilet training.

Despite strong evidence that diet can improve the symptoms of autism, many parents are reluctant to try dietary interventions. Generally, their children are picky eaters whose diets rely heavily on wheat and dairy products. Parents are understandably terrified at the idea of further limiting their children’s diets.

I know from my own experience that restricting a child's diet is not easy. But keep in mind that other interventions work best when a child is as calm and focused as possible.

Testing for Food Allergies

There are formal tests available for gluten, casein and other foods, but the easiest and cheapest "test" is to simply eliminate foods yourself.

Eliminate dairy products first. Casein can also be a hidden ingredient in water-based tuna and other products. It is essential to read labels and be thorough.

Try to stay with the diet for two to three weeks. If the child shows withdrawal symptoms, there is a good chance that he or she will benefit from the diet. If you see even minor changes, stick with it and further improvements will probably follow. Some research indicates that it can take up to a year to completely see the effects of a casein and gluten free diet.

If you are uncertain whether the diet is helping, reintroduce dairy products and see what happens. Watch for physical and/or behavioral symptoms. This is also a good way to convince resistant family members and teachers that diet makes a difference.

Also, try eliminating gluten. This requires a lot more research, label reading and preparation.

Although casein and gluten are the two most common problems with autistic children, other foods can be problematic as well. Some children experience symptoms such as aggression, agitation, incontinence, diarrhea and eczema after eating certain foods. Keep track of the foods the child has eaten before such incidents and see if there is any link. Try eliminating one food at a time for seven to ten days. Then reintroduce the food and see what happens.

What can my child eat?

There are many gluten-free products on the market. You can make excellent gluten-free breads with yeast in a bread-maker. The best yeast-free breads I have found are from the Francis Simun Bakery. Daniel's favorite cookies are Ener-G Foods' almond butter cookies.

Many rice cakes, potato chips and fries are gluten-free and are good substitutes for wheat products. At home we use Cascadian Farms frozen french fries. With all products, read labels and check them frequently to make sure ingredients haven't changed.

Rice milk and almond milk are good substitutes for cow's milk. Almond butter is a good replacement for peanut butter.

Also, try new foods. Autistic children will often eat new foods with a lot of salt. Try crunchy foods like celery or chickpeas (a good source of protein and fiber). Using a favorite cup to

introduce pureed foods with water and salt added is also a suggestion. I successfully used this method to introduce vegetables.

If your child won't drink alternative milk sources, try gradually adding the alternative milk to cow's milk and slowly change the proportion. The same worked for me when switching from peanut butter to almond butter.

Nutrition and Other Allergy Interventions

Dr. Richard Layton and nutritional consultant Kelly Dorfman have supervised Daniel's allergy and nutrition interventions. Both their practices focus on children with developmental problems.

Dr. Layton's immunotherapy drops have helped mitigate the effects of Daniel's food and environmental allergies. Daniel also takes Similase Jr. Digestive Enzymes and a probiotic to combat intestinal yeast based on research suggesting a connection between food allergies, digestion and yeast problems. Daniel also takes a liquid vitamin/mineral supplement with calcium.

There are many nutritional supplements that help some autistic children and have no impact at all on others. We tried DMG, a Vitamin B complex, cod liver oil, inositol, magnesium, folic acid and Super Nu-Thera. None of these had any visible impact on Daniel, but other children have responded positively.

Muriel Hect is the mother of a 10-year-old son who has autism and a former professional researcher and writer.

For more information on the connection between diet, nutrition and autism checkout:

Francis Simun Bakery
3106 Commerce St.
Dallas, TX 75226
(214) 741-4242
Web-site: www.FSBakeryOnline.com

Ener-G Foods, Inc.
5960 First Avenue South
P.O. Box 84487
Seattle, WA 98124-5787
Phone: (800) 331-5222
Web-site: www.ener-g.com

Other online Resources:
www.AllergyConnection.com
www.DevDelay.org

www.gfcfDiet.com

Resource: Excellent Parent February 2003:22-23