

# 9 Foods to Eat (and Avoid) for Improved ADHD Symptoms

**Your High-Protein, Low-Sugar,  
No-Additive Diet**



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*From the ADHD Experts at*

**ADDITUDE**

Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

# ADDITUDE

## Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

A trusted source of advice and information for families touched by attention-deficit disorder—  
and a voice of inspiration to help people with ADHD find success at home, at school, and on the job.

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# 9 Foods to Eat (and Avoid) for Improved ADHD Symptoms

**Did you know that too much of the wrong foods can actually shrink the decision-making parts of your brain? Use these ADHD diet and nutrition tips to improve your focus, memory, and mood — naturally.**

BY DR. DANIEL G. AMEN AND TANA AMEN, RN, BSN

## The Benefits of a Brain-Healthy Diet

“When I convince my patients to eat a brain-healthy diet, they notice better mood stability, stronger focus, and more stamina. They also report less distractibility, less tiredness in the late morning and mid-afternoon, and fewer cravings for sugary substances,” says Dr. Daniel G. Amen. These 9 strategies help patients at the Amen Clinics achieve these benefits.

### 1. Quality Over Quantity

Impulsivity leads many people diagnosed with ADHD to eat the wrong things too often. In fact, impulsivity is associated with obesity, which is bad for the brain. Eat only high-quality calories, which positively impact the way your brain and body work. For example, one cinnamon roll contains 720 calories and a small quiche has more than 1,000 calories. But a 400-calorie salad made of spinach, salmon, blueberries, apples, walnuts, and red bell peppers will do more than both of those high-calorie choices combined to 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 metabolism, your taste buds, and your health. Eating

#### FREE RESOURCE

6 Breakfasts You Can't  
Afford To Skip  
<http://additu.de/bfast>

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sugary processed foods, 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.

Good, healthy food is brain medicine. For people with all types of ADHD, it can have a powerfully positive effect on cognition, feelings, and behavior. Feeding your brain the right diet may even allow you to decrease your medication dosage, some research suggests. The wrong diet, on the other hand, can have a very real negative effect on ADHD symptoms.

## 2. Water, Water Everywhere

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 — that is, half your weight in ounces per day. If you are significantly obese, don't drink more than 120 ounces of water a day. If you are an athlete, make sure to replenish electrolytes after exercising.

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 and/or shed pounds.

## 3. Proactive About Protein

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 for pea and rice protein blends.

## 4. Go with Low-Glycemic, High-Fiber Carbs

Carbohydrates are not the enemy; they are essential to your health. Bad carbohydrates — ones that have been stripped of nutritional value, such as

### ADHD NUTRITION STUDIES

[\*Dietary Fiber Intake and Mortality in the NIH-AARP Diet and Health Study\*](#)

[\*Trends in Dietary Fiber Intake in the United States\*](#)

[\*Effect of Oxidative Damage Due to Excessive Protein Ingestion on Pancreas Function in Mice\*](#)

[\*Comparison of Saffron and Imipramine in the Treatment of Depression\*](#)

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sugar and simple carbs — are the problem. Eat carbohydrates that do not spike your blood sugar, and that are high in fiber, such as vegetables and legumes, and fruits like blueberries and apples. Experts recommend eating 25 to 35 grams of fiber a day, but **studies suggest that most people fall short of that**. 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.

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.

## 5. Go with Good Fats

Good fats are essential to your health. The solid weight of your brain is 60 percent fat (after all the water is removed). 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.

## 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.

### FREE DOWNLOAD

Fish Oil for ADHD

<http://additu.de/3j>

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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.

## 7. Spice Up Your Diet

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

- > Turmeric may decrease the plaque in the brain thought to be responsible for Alzheimer's disease.
- > **Saffron extract** was found to be as effective as antidepressant medication in treating people with major depression.
- > Rosemary, thyme, and sage help boost memory.
- > Cinnamon has been shown to help attention and blood flow.
- > Garlic and oregano boost blood flow to the brain.

## 8. You Are What You Eat...

...So avoid the bad stuff. Things like pesticides used in commercial farming can accumulate in your brain and body, even though the levels in each food may be low. 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.

Eat organically grown or raised food as much as possible. Eat free-range and grass-fed meat that is hormone and antibiotic free. In addition, eliminate food additives, preservatives, and artificial dyes and sweeteners. This means you must start reading food labels. If you do not know what is in something, do not eat it.

### THE EXPERTS:

Do Pesticides Make Symptoms Worse?

<http://additu.de/r7>

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## 9. Throw Out the 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, plus dairy, soy, and corn.

There are scientific reports of people whose brains and stomachs get better when they eliminate wheat and other gluten sources (such as barley, rye, spelt, imitation meats, and soy sauce) from their diet. ADHD-affected and autistic children often do better when we put them on elimination diets that get rid of wheat, dairy, processed foods, all forms of sugar and sugar alternatives, food dyes, and additives. There are blood tests that can help you determine your sensitivities to foods.

## ADHD Friendly Recipes

Nutritious ADHD-friendly recipes that will increase focus and help optimize your brain.

Try to serve as many of these foods as you can at each meal:

- A dark green and a yellow or red vegetable
- Whole grain
- Low-fat milk, yogurt, or cheese
- Protein (lean meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, or nuts)
- Omega-3 fatty acids (canola oil, walnuts, or cold-water fish, like fresh salmon)

Try it out with these recipes:

- [Focus and Energy Smoothie](#)
- [Great Brain Granola](#)
- [Ease Your Mind Asparagus Soup](#)
- [Perky Turkey Tacos with Guacamole](#)
- [Pumpkin Protein Bars with Creamy Coconut Frosting](#)
- [Fat Head Fish Sticks](#)
- [Fast, Healthy Recipes that Everyone Loves](#)

“The single most important thing I recommend to patients — especially parents of ADHD children — is to decrease the amount of sugar in the diet.” —  
*Sandy Newmark, M.D.*

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## Figuring Out Food Sensitivities

BY SANDY NEWMARK M.D.

A number of research studies have shown that many children with ADHD are sensitive to certain common foods in the diet. These sensitivities make their ADHD symptoms significantly worse. In one recent study 50 children were placed on a restricted diet for five weeks, and 78 percent of them had significant improvements in ADHD symptoms!

In my practice, I have seen improvements in many children when they stopped eating foods to which they were sensitive. The most common culprits are dairy, wheat, and soy.

It's important to know that ADHD children do not necessarily have "food allergies" in the strict, medical sense. Results when testing for food allergies are usually negative in these kids. The only way to know whether food sensitivities affect your child is to remove certain foods from his diet and observe his reaction. A child might have food sensitivities if he displays allergy symptoms, like hay fever, asthma, eczema, or GI problems. But I have seen children with none of these problems respond well to a change in diet.

If there are a few foods you suspect might be exacerbating your child's ADHD symptoms, eliminate one for two or three weeks. Observe your child's ADHD symptoms during that time. If you are thinking about start-

### ADHD NUTRITION

How to Test Food Sensitivities with an Elimination Diet

<http://additu.de/vg>

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ing a restrictive diet, find a professional to guide you. I know dietary changes are tough to engineer in a child with ADHD, but many families have done it successfully and are happy with the results.

## Try Helpful Herbs

Several herbs have been recommended for managing ADHD symptoms, including ginkgo, St. John's Wort, rhodiola, and ginseng. Most have been poorly researched, with two exceptions.

In a large European study on hyperactivity and sleep problems, a combination of valerian and lemon balm helped to relax children with ADHD by reducing anxiety. I use these herbs regularly for kids who deal with these problems. Consult a naturopathic doctor to find the appropriate dose for your child.

To improve attention, a new herbal product, called Nurture & Clarity, was developed and tested by a team of practitioners in Israel. The children taking it demonstrated significant improvement, as measured by their performance on the Test of Variables Attention, a computerized measurement of attention. I would not make definitive recommendations based on one study, but this product is worth looking into.

Finally, pycnogenol, an extract made from French maritime pine bark, has been shown to improve ADHD symptoms in a limited amount of research. I have found that the herb helps improve concentration in some children.

One last thought: Herbal products vary greatly in quality, and some contain contaminants. You should find a knowledgeable professional to help you identify reliable sources of pure, standardized herbs.

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## Reader Advice: Outsmarting a Picky Eater

All of these rules are nice, in theory, but what if you can't get your choosy children to actually put that well-balanced meal in their mouths? We asked our readers: How do you get your picky eater to chow down?

- We have a rule: “You try everything.” If you don't like it, you don't have to eat it, but you have to try it. If you choose not to eat dinner, then you do not get anything else for the evening. If you finish your dinner, you can have snacks.

—An *ADDitude* Reader

- Bribery — money, ice cream, a new car. Whatever it takes.

—Melissa D. Paxton, Massachusetts

- Get them involved in cooking. My kids signed up for a cooking class at the rec department. We have some cookbooks for kids. They are proud of their cooking and have become more open to trying different foods.

—Barbara Ives, Arlington, Massachusetts

- My child is not a picky eater. However, I find it pointless to make children eat things they hate. Being hungry tends to make most people less picky.

—An *ADDitude* Reader

- We use plates that are divided into three sections. Two sections have foods that we know our children will eat. The last section has a taste/small bite of an unfamiliar or non-preferred food. The kids are welcome to have seconds of any foods that they choose. When they eat the preferred foods, and try a taste of the non-preferred food, they are welcome to dessert later. This strategy eliminates power struggles. What to eat is the child's choice.

—Diane, Wisconsin

### FREE RESOURCE

The Picky Eater Survival Manual

<http://additu.de/pickyeat>

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- Our son has to try a small amount of what we're eating, and then he can make what he wants to eat.

—Diane, Peoria, Illinois

- We serve the fruits and veggies that they like. For example, all three of my ADHD kids will eat green beans, salad, tomatoes, apples, and oranges, so we have those items at meals. When we include items they are not keen on in their meals, we make sure to have a main dish and a veggie that everyone will eat.

—Beth Eiteljorge, Terre Haute, Indiana

- We introduce new foods while keeping one thing he likes on the plate.

—An *ADDitude* Reader

- I don't require my five-year-old to sit down for dinner. He spends all day sitting at school, so I allow him to eat on the run. He usually starts eating earlier than the rest of us, but I remind him to run over to the table and eat another bite every few minutes. Since I have been doing this, he has cleaned his plate every night.

—An *ADDitude* Reader

- I let my son watch TV while he eats, so he is less focused on the specific foods and more focused on the programs.

—Laura, Virginia

#### **FREE RESOURCE**

3 Healthy Snacks for Picky Eaters

<http://additu.de/4m>

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# **ADDitude Special Reports Available Now**

[www.adhdreports.com](http://www.adhdreports.com)

## **A Parent's Guide to ADHD, Diet & Nutrition**

**An ADDitude special report on food, supplements and herbs for your child.**

Learn about the foods, vitamins, supplements, and herbs that can help your child better manage her ADHD symptoms. What is an ADHD diet? Is sugar evil? What about gluten? This eBook has answers.

>> Learn more about this special report: <http://additu.de/dietebook>

## **Mindfulness & Other Natural Treatments**

**Treat ADHD symptoms with mindfulness, yoga, breathing techniques, exercise, and green time.**

Mindfulness has been called a superpower. A therapy for depression. And even the key to finding a calm in a sea of ADHD-fueled distress. But what is mindfulness, exactly? How do you learn it? And does it really improve focus and organization?

>> Learn more about this special report: <http://additu.de/mindful>

## **ADHD Medication & Treatment**

**Everything you need to know about medication options, minimizing side effects, alternative therapies, and more.**

You're relieved to know, finally, that your child's symptoms have a name. Or that your inability to focus or pay attention in school as a child – or at work as an adult – is due to attention deficit disorder. But now you have questions. This eBook will explain the myriad of treatment options.

>> Learn more about this special report: <http://additu.de/medebook>

## **FREE ADDitude Downloadable Booklets**

### **Does Your Child Have a Learning Disability?**

Use this self-test to find out if your child's problems at school may be due to LD

### **Is It Depression?**

Depression is a serious mood disorder, but it's not always easy to recognize.

### **Who Can Treat ADHD?**

Doctor? Psychiatrist? Coach? Learn who can treat your attention deficit.

### **You Know You Have ADHD When...**

Real ADHDers share personal stories highlighting the lighter side of living with attention deficit.

### **Is It Adult ADHD?**

Habitually disorganized? Always running late? It could be ADHD.

### **Smart Comebacks**

Witty responses to ADHD doubters.

### **It's Not ADHD**

Doctors are sometimes too quick to diagnose ADHD. Read up on common misdiagnoses.

**Find these and many more free ADHD resources online at:**  
<http://additu.de/freedownloads>

## **FREE ADHD Webinar Replays from ADDitude:**

### **ADHD-Friendly Nutrition Strategies for Your Child and Teen**

>> <http://additu.de/1a2>

Parents of picky-eaters, rejoice! Nutrition expert Laura Stevens, M.S., explains how to manage common food sensitivities so kids get the nutrients they need to grow and thrive.

### **Healing the ADHD Brain**

>> <http://additu.de/1a1>

There's no one-size-fits-all approach for treating ADHD. Daniel G. Amen, M.D., explains a multitude of treatment options that you can implement into every facet of your life — from medication and supplements to diet & exercise and neurofeedback. Plus how personal coaching can help achieve specific goals.

### **Sound Medicine For Your Child's Brain**

>> <http://additu.de/sound>

Crank up the tunes, ADHDers! Studies show that activities such as listening to classical music or learning to play an instrument can improve your child's auditory, visual/spatial, and motor skills. In this audio and slide presentation, host Sharlene Habermeyer shares fun ways you can incorporate music into your child's routine so he can reap the brain-boosting benefits.

### **Food Fixes for Better Attention, Focus, and Cognition**

>> <http://additu.de/19g>

Eat your way to improved health and focus. Learn how your meal choices can impact ADHD symptoms -- for better or worse. In this audio and slide presentation, hosted by Tana Amen, BSN, RN, find out which foods you should eliminate from your family's diet, and how to spice up your weekly menu by incorporating healthy alternatives. Dig in!

### **Thrive with ADHD: Dr. Ned Hallowell on the Best Medical and Natural Treatments**

>> <http://additu.de/5s>

Let Dr. Ned Hallowell inspire you to switch from trying to "fix" your child or yourself to raising a champion. He discusses an optimized treatment plan that includes medical and natural interventions as well as lifestyle changes.

## **FREE ADHD Newsletters from ADDitude**

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Expert advice on managing your household, time, money, career, and relationships

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Behavior and discipline, time management, disorganization, making friends, and more critical strategies for parents

### **ADHD and LD at School**

How to get classroom accommodations, finish homework, work with teachers, find the right schools, and much more

### **Treating ADHD**

Treatment options including medications, food, supplements, brain training, mindfulness and other alternative therapies