

Elimination Diets and Autism by the Oklahoma Autism Network

To Eliminate or not to eliminate, that is the question many parents ask regarding dietary interventions for their child with autism. Elimination diets involve systematically removing specific foods from your child's diet. The most common foods discussed for children with autism are casein, the protein in milk and gluten, or wheat.

Elimination diets may be considered when a child shows signs of an intolerance or allergy to a particular food. Food intolerance is a digestive system response and symptoms can include but are not limited to stomach pain, gas, heartburn, diarrhea, and irritability. A food allergy is an immune system response that occurs when the body mistakes an ingredient in a food as harmful and responds by creating a defense system. Symptoms of an allergy can range from mild to severe and can include but are not limited to a rash, diarrhea, restricted airway, and anaphylaxis.

Before starting an elimination diet there are several questions to consider:

- Does my child with autism show signs of a food intolerance or food allergy? If you are unsure talk to your child's physician or consult a dietician.
- What am I hoping to see change as a result of eliminating foods from my child's diet? As with any intervention it is important before you start something new to determine what you want to change. It is important to consider gathering some basic information for at least a week before you start the diet. (see example of an information sheet that can be used before you begin)
- How long will we try the diet before we decide if it is working and is worth continuing?

Diet changes for any young child can be difficult, but for children with autism it can prove to be even more challenging. Many children with autism have strong food preferences and may only be eating a few foods. If your child is only eating a few foods, it is important to consult a dietician or your child's physician before eliminating foods from his diet. For example, if your child's preferred foods are all dairy based (milk, yogurt, cheese) you don't want to eliminate casein from his diet until you have added new foods that he will eat. Adequate nutrition is critical to assure good growth and brain development and a child can easily become malnourished if their diet consists of only a few foods.

Currently there is little research to prove or disprove the effectiveness of elimination diets (Millward, 2008). In light of this fact it is important for parents to become their own investigators and to approach any dietary change for their child in a systematic and thoughtful way.

Websites with additional resources

Talk About Curing Autism Now

<http://www.talkaboutcuringautism.org/gfcf-diet/gfcf-diet-basics.htm>

Autism Network for Dietary Intervention

<http://www.autismndi.com/>

References

Millward C, Ferriter M, Calver S, Connell-Jones G._2008. Gluten and casein free diets for autism spectrum disorders. Cochrane Database System Review, 2008.

Disclaimer

Information in this article is not intended to replace medical advice from your child's physician or other medical providers. Parents are strongly encouraged to seek advice from a medical and/or educational professional before beginning any new intervention for their child with autism.