



THE PLAIN DEALER

NUTRI-NEWS Q&A

Don't blame candy for hyperactive child

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I'm so confused: Research says sugar doesn't have anything to do with hyperactivity. On the face of it, that seems counterintuitive. What's more important is that my 9-year-old practically steals anything with sugar in it. He'll polish off a bowlful of candy, and he's skinny as a rail. Someone said he's ADHD. What's your opinion on sugar, hyperactivity, ADHD - and how should I handle this? I'm not much of a cook.

- B.J., Parma

The first question is whether your son really has ADHD, commonly called hyperactivity. It is, after all, typical of children to be fidgety, bouncy and distractable. And humans have an inborn preference for sweets that already is apparent in infancy. If you think your son might have ADHD, ask your pediatrician about tools that can be used to make a diagnosis.

Interest in the relationship between diet and hyperactivity dates to the 1970s, when Dr. Benjamin Feingold published a book proposing that salicylates, artificial colors and artificial flavors cause hyperactivity. The so-called "Feingold Diet" requires the avoidance of aspirin and aspirin-containing medications, artificial colors and flavors, preservatives, tea, coffee, wine, vinegar, peppers, tomatoes, some seasonings, many fruits and some vegetables. This diet excludes the common menu of childhood and adolescence: pizza, pasta and Southwestern food, along with important sources of many vitamins. It is also difficult to follow if you don't like to cook from scratch.

Other researchers have suggested that sugar causes hyperactivity reactions in susceptible children. This has been embraced by parents who notice that their offspring seem to abandon all sense of civilization when exposed to sweets.

These theories have been tested in a number of studies over the last three decades. The bottom line? There might be a small number of children with diagnosed food allergies, for whom diets that eliminate allergens might be helpful.

But for the vast majority, neither Feingold nor sugar-free diets have been proven effective in children with ADHD. Neither the American Academy of Pediatrics nor the National Institutes of Health supports this approach. The most effective treatments at this time are thought to be medication and psychosocial/ behavioral therapy.

There are sound nutritional reasons for steering your son away from too much candy - but hyperactivity probably is not one of them.

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