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Specialized Diets for Autism: Options and Considerations

By Staci Small MA, RD; Registered Dietitian and Owner of The Wellness Philosophy, Inc.

Families often consult with me to find out if implementing a specialized diet may be beneficial for their child with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

I find that either parents have attempted diets on their own with little to no success, have seen improvement from a diet but want to fine tune, or eagerly want to start. No matter which category families may fall in, if implemented correctly, specialized diets can be highly effective in aiding many of the symptoms associated with autism. Common improvements reported by parents include increased speech and language, improved behavior and social interaction, sleep patterns, bowel regularity, growth, and an overall healthier child.

Which Diets are Most Commonly Used?

In my practice, I determine which nutritional approach is most appropriate for each patient based on individual symptoms and issues identified during my assessment. I most commonly work with families to implement and monitor specialized diets such as the gluten- and casein-free diet, specific carbohydrate diet (SCD), gut and psychology syndrome diet (GAPS), and low-phenol diet. The success of a special diet is largely dependent on continually assessing the individual's growth,

food intake, stools, and other clinical symptoms. Ensuring proper nutrient intake while on a specialized diet is imperative.

Nutrient Deficiencies Can Impede Diet Effectiveness

Nutrient deficiencies are very common in the general population and especially those with autism. In my practice, I complete a detailed nutrition assessment to diagnose nutrient deficiencies. Learning, focus, behavior, and growth are all dependent on proper nutrition. Uncovering the deficiencies that are unique to each individual is crucial for children of all diagnoses to function optimally.

What About my Picky Eater?

Picky eating and autism often go hand in hand. Parents regularly report their child will only eat a small variety of foods such as chicken nuggets, French fries, and fish-shaped crackers. So how do you get a child with such self-limiting eating behavior to eat nutritious foods, while at the same time implementing a new diet? Working with a professional trained in the physiological components that can cause such limited feeding behavior

can be very beneficial. Food sensitivities, nutrient deficiencies, and intestinal permeability can all be contributing factors which can be uncovered during a thorough nutrition assessment and simple lab tests.

Tips to get Started

There are several great resources available to parents interested in exploring special diets. Local support groups and organizations such as TACA can offer good perspective from others currently following special diets. For parents seeking guidance on which diet is most appropriate for their child, I encourage consulting with a licensed nutrition professional experienced in biomedical nutrition care for ASD or a practitioner following the principles of the Medical Academy of Pediatric Special Needs (MAPS).

