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Nutrition Fundamentals-The Foundation of a Healing Approach to Autism

Mention the words “nutrition” and “autism” and many people quickly but exclusively think of gluten and casein free diets (GFCF). While this diet has certainly helped to improve the symptoms of autism for many children, there is far more about nutrition and its relationship to autism that every parent should know before embarking on the complex and often expensive journey into the world of biomedical therapies. Good nutrition is the cornerstone of growth and development for all children, healthy or ill. When nutritional status is compromised it will directly affect a child’s progress, and for a child with a chronic illness like autism, the lack of critical nutrients can have far reaching effects.

Children with autism often exhibit a frustrating mix of picky eating behaviors and limited diets, bowel irregularities, food allergies or sensitivities and physical and behavioral signs of nutrient deficiencies. A vicious cycle is created which goes something like this:

- The poorly functioning digestive tract (whether from food allergies, lack of healthy bacteria or enzymes etc) causes inflammation and/or discomfort which makes a child want to eat less
- The inflammation reduces the ability to break down and absorb nutrients from food
- The limited intake reduces the amount of vitamins, minerals and other nutrients needed not only to help heal the inflammation, but to support brain function as well.
- As a result, inflammation is not addressed, the digestive tract remains compromised and the gulf between nutrition needs and nutrient intake grows ever wider.

To further complicate matters, children with autism frequently suffer from inefficiencies in many other biochemical processes that are nutrition dependent. As the nutrition gap grows, these pathways are further compromised. Some examples include the following:

- The immune system is commonly skewed in children on the spectrum. A normal immune system requires essential fatty acids, zinc, Vitamin C and protein, as well as many other nutrients for normal function.
- Research shows that ASD kids often have a reduced ability to detoxify from the everyday chemicals and toxins we are naturally exposed to. To perform normal detoxification reactions, the body requires a compound called glutathione, which is made from pieces of protein called amino

acids. In addition, natural detoxification requires B vitamins, and minerals such as selenium.

- Because children on the spectrum are chronically ill, their small bodies are under tremendous stress, and produce lots of the free radicals that are damaging to cells. Antioxidants such as Vitamin C and Vitamin E are critical for quenching the free radical fire.
- An emerging area of study has linked autism with mitochondrial dysfunction. The mitochondria are the energy producing engines of all cells, and not only impact muscle tone, but can also affect mood and brain function. The mitochondria need the amino acid carnitine, Coenzyme Q10, and a variety of B vitamins to do their job.
- Mood and behavior modulating neurotransmitters are built from the amino acids tryptophan and tyrosine. They require Vitamin A and D, B vitamins and other nutrients to become dopamine and serotonin.

While the GFCF diet is certainly an important consideration, a comprehensive nutritional intervention for autism is far more than a single diet that simply removes specific foods from a child's menu. Instead, it should include all of the following components:

- Evaluation of the child's current diet for nutritional adequacy
- A visual examination to observe physical signs of nutrient deficiencies
- A proper medical history
- Interventions to heal an impaired digestive tract, such as probiotics (good bacteria), digestive enzymes, healing foods and/or herbs to mend intestinal cells
- Identification and removal of any problem foods and recommendations for nutritionally comparable replacements
- Specific, individualized nutrition therapy.
- Menu suggestions designed to insure appropriate intake of all major nutrients (fat, carbohydrate and protein), and micronutrients such as vitamins and minerals.
- Supplement recommendations when diet alone will not meet nutritional needs.
- Recommendations and/or referrals to specialists to expand a picky eater's diet
- Ongoing support and modifications as needed.

When faced with a dizzying array of therapies and other interventions in the struggle to improve the quality of an autistic child's life, parents should make nutrition a priority early in the process and find a qualified dietitian/nutritionist to develop a specific plan for their child. Not only can behavioral and cognitive improvements result from dietary modification, but well nourished children will sleep better, have improved moods, and less bowel distress. They will gain much more from their other therapies and may need fewer or less intense medical interventions later. Without adequate nutrition, it is far harder to achieve these goals.

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