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| **Resources – Autism and Nutrition** |
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Adopted From: <http://nchpad.org/165/1280/Down~Syndrome~and~Nutrition>

Nutritional Needs and Recommended Guidelines

Growth, Nutrient, and Energy Needs

* Same as those for the general population unless there are digestive issues.
* Some people with autism may be at nutritional risk due to their behaviors around foods and eating. Food refusal and difficulty in introducing new foods into the diet of a person with autism are common problems. For example, a person will eat only few, specific foods with specific preferences for 'dry' or 'wet' form, color, brand, or shape. This type of behavior may put them at nutritional risk, especially if entire food groups (i.e., vegetables or dairy) are refused.

Common Health Concerns Related to Autism

* Food Sensitivities  
  Researchers have found that psychoactive peptides from improperly digested casein (milk) or gluten-based (wheat) foods affect brain function in some individuals with autism.   
  The treatment is a gluten-free, casein-free diet. It is important to consult with a physician and a licensed nutrition professional before eliminating foods from the diet.
* Gluten-Free Diet Suggestions
  + Instead of wheat flour, use potato, rice, soy, or bean flour.
  + Avoid all foods that contain wheat (including spelt, triticale, and kamut), rye, barley, and possibly oats - most grain, pasta, cereal, and many processed foods.
  + Plain meat, fish, rice, fruits, beans, nuts, seeds, and vegetables do not contain gluten.
  + Hidden sources of gluten include additives, preservatives, and stabilizers found in processed food, medicines, and mouthwash. If ingredients are not itemized, check with the manufacturer of the product.
* Casein-Free Diet Suggestions
  + Instead of cow's milk, use rice or potato milk in cooking. Do not use soy milk initially. Many children who have problems with cow's milk also react to soy protein. Rice milk is sugary and should not be used in large amounts.
  + Casein is found in milk, yogurt, cheese, ice cream, and pudding. On [food labels](http://nchpad.org/84/621/Food~Labels), milk can be listed as Na caseinate, sodium caseinate, dry milk powder, or hydrolyzed protein.
  + Eggs are found in the dairy case in most supermarkets but do not contain casein.
  + For more information on the diet, visit [http://www.gfcfdiet.com](http://www.gfcfdiet.com/).
* Vitamin and Mineral Supplements  
  People with autism may be selective eaters, which may put them at risk for some vitamin and mineral deficiencies. If a diet is high in overly processed foods, a person may be deficient in vitamins C, E, and B-6 and minerals such as magnesium, molybdenum, chromium, and selenium.

Recommendations regarding supplements and special diets should come from registered dietitians or licensed nutritionists and physicians.

If a person is:

* 1. A picky eater,
  2. Has extensive food allergies,
  3. Has problems with food texture,
  4. Is always tired and lacks energy,
  5. Has chronic diarrhea or stomach distress

Ask your physician or nutritionist about nutritional supplements.

**Approaches for Healthy Lifestyles**

**Making food choices**

Learning how to make food choices starts in childhood. Individuals with autism have difficulty internalizing concepts, but are comfortable with routine. The basics of good nutrition can often be learned, if repeated frequently over a long period of time. It is important to recognize that using food as a reward may contribute to weight gain and dental problems.

* For all ages
  + When trying to expand the diet, introduce only one food at a time.
  + Instead of a cookie jar, have a bowl of cut-up fruit in the refrigerator.
  + Look for low-fat, crunchy alternatives to chips for those that crave foods with texture. Try baked chips, Veggie Booty, or nuts.
* For Children:
  + Avoid using food as a reward.
  + Avoid offering food unnecessarily.
  + Offer healthy snacks such as fruits and vegetables, low-fat popcorn, cereal bars, and low-fat yogurt.
  + Offer only water as a beverage with meals so the child does not fill up with high-calorie liquids and then reject food.

**Getting involved in food preparation**

Being an active participant in food preparation may teach a person with autism skills that may be applied to other areas of life.

* Use visual cues like real food, photographs, or symbols to teach food groups (bread group, fruit, vegetable, meat, dairy). Visual cues are useful for people who are visual thinkers.
* Create a list of favorite foods.
* Arrange the list by food groups - this becomes a tool for menu planning and snack choices.
* Engage in food preparation, i.e., washing the vegetables or getting ingredients from the pantry.
* Stir batter or pudding.

**Ideas for increasing physical activity:**

* For all ages:
  + Park farther away.
  + Play "tag" for a few minutes in the park.
  + Walk to the corner store or activities that are in the neighborhood.
* For adolescents and adults:
  + Use a push mower to mow a lawn - 10 minutes of pushing burns 45 calories.
  + Rake a lawn - 10 minutes of raking burns 40 calories.
  + Wash windows.
  + Mop floors.
  + Take stairs instead of an elevator.
  + Connect with neighborhood walking groups.
  + Join a group that does mall walking.