

Stepping Stones

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A Newsletter for Milestones – For Kids' Success
Therapist Owned • Child Centered • Family Friendly

Diets, Diets, & More Diets

By Laura Harnasch, OTR/L

Why dietary intervention? Dietary interventions can have a significant effect for some children in the areas of behavior and cognition. Symptoms of autism and ADHD may also show improvement through dietary interventions. Specific symptoms that have been reported to improve with dietary intervention include: self-stimming behaviors, language, attention, hyperactivity, learning, fatigue, aggression, self-injurious behavior, rashes, digestion, diarrhea, constipation, gas, and more.

There are a wide variety of diets that have been utilized with children with special needs. These include Gluten Free Casein Free (GFCF), Specific Carbohydrate Diet (SCD), Food Sensitivity Elimination, Blood Type Diet, Feingold Diet, Feast Without Yeast, Body Ecology, Low Oxalate Diet, and others. For the purpose of this article, three common diets will be explored.

Gluten Free Casein Free (GFCF) – Gluten is the protein found in foods such as wheat, rye, and other grains. Casein is the protein found in dairy products from cows, sheep, goats, or buffalo. The GFCF diet removes all gluten and casein from the diet and must be strictly adhered to, to be effective.

The GFCF diet may be beneficial for individuals who have difficulty tolerating or digesting gluten and casein. These difficulties are due to a missing or blocked enzyme called DPP IV which aids in the digestion of gluten and casein. When gluten or casein molecules are not properly broken down in the gut they are often absorbed into the bloodstream and cross the blood brain barrier. When these “morphine like” peptides cross into the brain they can cause an opioid effect (a “high”, extreme cravings, and withdrawal symptoms). As a consequence, children crave wheat or dairy foods and consume them as the primary foods in their diet to achieve this “opioid like” high.

The symptoms that may be observed in children who have difficulty tolerating or digesting gluten and casein include: hyperactivity, moodiness, unexplained giggling, spacey appearance, poor memory, sleep problems, extreme picky eaters, never feeling full, GI difficulties, constant hunger, and difficulty multi-tasking. The GFCF diet can help to heal the digestive tract and eliminate foods that are toxic to these children. Although you are not able to use standard flour on this diet, there are a number of gluten free options such as rice flour, potato flour, tapioca flour, nut flours, and many more. Casein free options include: rice milk, hemp milk, almond milk, hazelnut milk, and coconut milk.

Specific Carbohydrate Diet (SCD) – The Specific Carbohydrate Diet eliminates all disaccharides (two-sugar molecules) and polysaccharides (starches). Only monosaccharides (glucose, fructose and galactose) such as fruits, honey, and most non-starchy vegetables are allowed. All sugars (except monosaccharides) and starches are removed, including but not limited to table sugar, maple syrup, rice, pastas, breads, potatoes, certain beans, rice milk, and cornstarch.

This diet is based on the principle that some individuals cannot digest carbohydrates, most likely due to damage to the small intestine mucosa. This maldigestion leads to malabsorption of disaccharides. This maldigestion in turn feeds bacteria and yeast and causes overgrowth. The bacteria destroy enzymes and further inhibit carbohydrate metabolism. This creates further damage to the small intestine villi and microvilli completing a “vicious cycle” that continues to deteriorate.

Monosaccharides are allowed on the SCD because they are a single sugar molecule and do not need to be broken down before they are absorbed. Because these molecules absorb immediately they can be eaten without difficulty and do not appear to feed the harmful microorganisms. The SCD diet has three levels of foods that are introduced. It relies heavily on nuts, eggs, unprocessed meats, fruits, and vegetables. Some natural cheeses and homemade yogurt are also allowed.

The SCD diet was originally used for those with severe intestinal damage suffering from diseases like ulcerative colitis, Crohn's Disease, and celiac. It has since proved very helpful for children with autism spectrum disorders that involve chronic diarrhea. It is also sometimes recommended for children with candida overgrowth. For this diet to work, the guidelines must be strictly adhered to while consistently avoiding all of the foods that are not allowed.

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Minute with the Milestones Staff

Laura Harmasch, OTR/L

Position at Milestones for Kids' Success: I am an occupational therapist. I help children to improve fine and visual motor skills (including writing), feeding skills, sensory processing skills, strength, and activities of daily living (dressing, grooming, etc.) I see clients in a variety of settings including in the clinic, in homes, at the CoACH Care Center, and at an elementary school.

Education and Experience: Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy. I have been practicing for 5 1/2 years.

Favorite aspects of working with families at Milestones: I love meeting such a diverse group of families and celebrating the gains that their children are making. I also love hearing the crazy things that kids say! You never know what it might be.

What makes Milestones unique: We work in close collaboration across all disciplines. This allows us to problem solve for clients and helps us look at the clients' needs in a more holistic way. It also helps us to be more effective in our treatment.

How do you spend your free time? In my free time, I do professional children's photography, rock climb, hang out with friends, and enjoy traveling. My latest adventure was a mission trip to Russia. ○

Feingold Diet – The Feingold diet eliminates all artificial phenolic additives and certain salicylates. Artificial phenolic additives are petroleum based additives such as artificial colorings, flavorings, and preservatives. Salicylates are a natural chemical found in plant – based foods. Plants produce salicylates as a natural pesticide to protect themselves. The Feingold diet does not eliminate all salicylates, only the ones that they have found children (and some adults) to be most reactive to. This means that some foods that have higher salicylate values are allowed on the Feingold Diet.

The Feingold Diet eliminates the following additives and chemicals:

- Synthetic coloring
- Artificial flavoring
- Artificial preservatives: BHA, BHT, and TBHQ – these are major preservatives that are found in many foods, but not typically printed on the label.
- Some Salicylates: almonds, apples, apricots, berries, cherries, cloves, coffee, cucumbers, currants, grapes, nectarines, oil of wintergreen, oranges, peaches, peppers (bell & chili), pickles, plums, prunes, raisins, rose hips, tangelos, tangerines, tea, and tomatoes. Aspirin is also high in salicylates.
- Artificial sweeteners (only aspartame is eliminated)
- Food additives (such as MSG, sodium benzoate, nitrites, sulfites)
These are not strictly eliminated but are suggested.

Indications that a child may benefit from the Feingold Diet include: dark circles under eyes, red face/ears, diarrhea, hyperactivity, impulsivity, aggression, headaches, head banging/self-injury, impatience, short attention span, difficulty falling asleep, night waking for several hours, inappropriate laughter, hives, stomach aches, bed wetting and day wetting, dyslexia, speech difficulties, tics, and some forms of seizures. This diet may also be helpful for children with self-injurious behaviors that have not found relief from the GFCC diet.

Please note this article is not meant to replace medical advice or that of a nutritionist. Please consult with a trained professional if you require specific nutrition information for your family or child. The information contained in this article has been gathered from a variety of presentations attended by the author. It is recommended that you complete further research on this topic so that you can make an informed decision for your family. ○



Professional Profile

Sueson Vess

Founder and President, Special Eats

Sueson Vess is a food writer, cookbook author and self-described "Food Coach." Vess is also the founder and President of Special Eats, the highly successful organization that provides solutions to the challenges of healthy eating, cooking, and shopping for individuals with special dietary needs.

Special Eats focuses on helping individuals with multiple food intolerances, celiac disease, wheat/gluten sensitivity, and other special needs diets. "75% of the Special Eats individual clients are parents of children with autism or ADD who are referred by their doctor," says Vess. "I provide diet consultations offering parents meal planning tools, resources, substitute ingredients and recipes. Special Eats also offers three support groups in the Chicagoland area with over 700 members."

Vess' research began when she was diagnosed with celiac disease, and also learned that she was dairy and soy intolerant. After gathering information for herself and with a culinary background, she

decided to share her findings and recipes by authoring a cookbook. Since then, doctors and other healthcare professionals have been seeking her expertise for their patients.

"The key is more than just a special diet that is gluten and dairy free," she explains. "People can do that and still have an unhealthy diet. It is essential to create a diet that is nutrient-dense while you replace foods with healthy and good-tasting alternatives."

Vess is especially moved by the letters she receives from mothers telling her how the dietary changes and the cookbook have helped them. "I find that when you get the diet correct, then the child is able to focus on other issues, respond better in school, and even smile more."

Vess advises all parents not to be afraid of cooking. "Keep it simple," she says. "Food is so critical, and you are already cooking and eating. The most basic therapy for children is eating healthy."

Sueson Vess and the team from Special Eats often collaborate with the staff from Milestones for Kids' Success. ○

Basic Tips for Improving your Family's Diets

By Laura Harmasch, OTR/L

Are special diets unnecessary for your child or too much for you to commit to as a family right now? You can still significantly improve your family's diet by making small changes to your everyday life. Try picking just one or two ideas below and implementing them as steps toward improving your family's dietary habits.

1. Remove food dyes - food dyes can increase hyper activity and behavioral problems. Previously these dyes were made from coal tar, but they are now made from petroleum (which is also used to make gasoline). These dyes can stress the liver and may suppress immunity.
2. Cut back on sugar – reducing sugar intake improves your overall health and decreases the acidity in your body. One simple way to decrease sugar intake is to eliminate juice or soda. While generally thought to be a healthy choice, juice contains a high volume of sugar and is often consumed multiple times throughout the day by children. If your child refuses to drink water, try slowly beginning to water down their juice so that eventually there is very little juice in it. To decrease soda intake try switching to more natural carbonated juices that are sweetened with cane sugar.
3. Cut out artificial sweeteners – sweeteners such as saccharine, aspartame, sucralose, and zylitol are commonly known by names such as Sweet and Low, NutraSweet, Splenda, and Equal. These have repeatedly been shown to be linked to a number of health problems such as headaches, immune suppression, liver damage, cramping, diarrhea, etc. Avoid these whenever possible. Also watch for high fructose corn syrup as this substance is addictive. The goal is to cut down on sugar consumption overall but other more natural sweeteners such as cane sugar, agave syrup, tapioca syrup, brown rice syrup, Maple Syrup (grades B or C), honey, or stevia may provide healthier alternatives.
4. Remove Monosodiumglutamate (MSG) from diet – MSG is a neurotoxin that convinces your brain that food tastes better than it really does. It is often found in foods that have a meaty or cheesy taste. Many people have sensitivities to MSG but do not realize that it is the MSG that causes certain rashes, headaches, etc.
5. Remove Nitrites from diet – these are chemicals that help to preserve meats. These can be found in certain processed meats such as: bacon, hot dogs, and some fish. Nitrites create free radicals in the body. Free radicals have been linked to cancer. These also stress the body's detox system and can cause headaches in some people. There are nitrite free versions available for many of these foods.
6. Add healthier oils – healthy oils frequently contain monounsaturated fats which are good for your heart or Omega 3s which are frequently lacking in the American diet. Oils that may be heated include: expeller pressed coconut oil, grape seed oil, extra virgin olive oil, avocado oil, palm oil, and sunflower oil. Non heated (or non cooking) oils include: hemp seed oil, olive oil, flaxseed oil, walnut oil, or almond oil.
7. Remove the Trans fats – artificial trans fats are made when hydrogen gas reacts with oil. They can be found in cookies, crackers, icing, potato chips, stick margarine and microwave popcorn. About 80 percent of trans fat in American's diet comes from factory-produce partially hydrogenated vegetable oil.



Public health experts warn that these kinds of fats clog arteries and cause obesity. Trans fats not only raise total cholesterol levels, they also deplete good cholesterol (HDL), which helps protect against heart disease.

8. Buy organic – foods free from pesticides and herbicides. Pesticides are not only on foods but are also in foods. Washing your fruits and vegetables may help remove some of the pesticides but will not remove the pesticides that are in them. Organic food is much richer in vitamins, minerals and fiber and retains the levels of nutrients for much longer. If you can't afford to go to totally organic look for a list of foods highest in pesticides and try replacing those. One such source is the Environmental Working Group website at www.ewg.org.
9. Buy free range chicken, grass fed beef, wild caught fish – These animals feed on natural foods rather than man made feeds. As a result they contain a higher level of nutrients.
10. Decrease the use of soy products – soy products are one of the top 9 food allergens. Occasionally eating unprocessed soy products such as edimame, or fermented tempeh and miso are okay, but most other soy products are extremely processed and therefore many of the benefits are lost. Soy is also very high in plant estrogens and is thought to contribute to rising infertility rates. You can read *The Whole Soy Story*, by Kaayla Daniels for more details. If you are looking to replace soy milk try substituting almond milk or rice milk.

Many healthier food options can be found at your local grocery stores such as Jewel, Dominick's, Meijer, Super Target, etc. With the recent increase in demand for healthier alternatives many of the grocery store chains are starting to respond. For hard to find items try stores such as Fruitful Yield, Trader Joes, Whole Foods, or other health food stores.

Please note this article is not meant to replace medical advice or that of a nutritionist. Please consult with a trained professional if you require specific nutrition information for your family or child. The information contained in this article has been gathered from a variety of presentations attended by this therapist. It is recommended that you complete further research on this topic so that you can make an informed decision for your family. ○



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Attention Parents and Pediatricians!

Milestones–for Kids' Success has added a new section to our website that parents and pediatricians are raving about. The Guide to Developmental Milestones section contains information regarding the ages at which children from birth through 5 years typically achieve certain developmental milestones. The comprehensive list includes key indicators for social and emotional development; fine and gross motor skills; speech, language and hearing; sensory; self-help; and oral motor and feeding.

Visit www.milestones4kids.com. Then click on the "Developmental Milestones" tab.

Milestone's Community Awareness committee is currently working with local pediatricians' offices to provide copies for the parents and families that they see.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your infant's/child's development or if you are a pediatrician who is interested in having copies to distribute to your patients and their families, please contact Milestones – For Kids' Success at 630 792-1800.

Milestones also continues to offer free developmental screenings for children from birth to five years of age. 

Additional Resources

There are many available resources about dietary interventions including books and online resources. A few of these are listed below:

Special Diets for Special Kids, by Lisa Lewis (There is a sequel as well)

www.talkaboutcuringautism.org – GFCF

www.feingold.org

www.nourishinghope.com – All dietary intervention and diets

www.pecanbread.com – SCD Diet

www.autismndi.com – GFCF