



Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) for Children: BHN Nutrition Fact Sheet

A healthy diet includes foods from all the food groups. Serving regular meals and nutritious snacks can help support your child's growth.

Calorie Needs

Your child with ADHD may not always eat enough food. For example, they may skip meals or forget to eat. ADHD medications may decrease your child's appetite. Make sure your child eats breakfast including foods from each of the food groups. Provide a lunch that is high in nutrients. Have dinner ready when the medication side effects wear off.

Appropriate Growth Rate

Your child's doctor should regularly measure your child's height and weight. Talk with your doctor or dietitian about your child's growth. They can tell if your child is growing and gaining weight at the appropriate rate.

Important Nutrients for Children with ADHD

Research studies have reported that some children with ADHD may have low levels of omega-3 fatty acids, iron, zinc, and magnesium¹. Your child should get enough of these nutrients by eating a well-balanced diet. Supplements should not be taken unless recommended by your child's doctor or registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN).

Good Sources of Key Nutrients

Omega-3	Iron*	Zinc
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flaxseed Walnuts Chia Seed Certain Cold Water Fish (Salmon, Mackerel, Trout)* <p>* For young children limit to 2-3 servings a week</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beef, Pork, Chicken, Eggs Beans, Lentils Dark Leafy Greens Dried Fruit (Raisins, Apricots) <p>*Include a vitamin C containing food source with meals (i.e., orange juice, strawberries, tomatoes) to enhance iron absorption.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beef, Pork, Chicken, Lamb Wheat Germ Yogurt Cashews, Almonds
Magnesium	Protein (Animal)*	Protein (Plant)*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dark Leafy Greens Nuts and Seeds Bananas Avocado 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beef Pork Chicken Eggs (protein is in the white) Salmon <p>*Pick lean or low-fat meat</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tofu Nuts and Seeds Quinoa Beans, Lentils Soy milk <p>*Choose low sodium, unsalted nuts & seeds</p>

Meal Planning Guidelines

Children from 6-18 years old can use the following food group recommendations as a guide for eating a balanced diet. Visit choosemyplate.gov to personalize your child's diet.

Food Groups					
Grains	Vegetables	Fruits	Dairy	Protein Foods	Oils
Servings Per Day					
6	2½	2	2 ½	5 ½	5 teaspoons
1 slice bread, ½ bun or muffin, 1 packet instant oatmeal, ½ cup cooked cereal, rice, or pasta, 1 6" tortilla; Make at least half your grains whole	1 cup raw or cooked vegetables or vegetable juice; 2 cups raw leafy greens	1 cup fruit or 100% fruit juice, or ½ cup of dried fruit	1 cup milk, yogurt, or soymilk (soy beverage), 1 ½ ounces natural cheese, or 2 ounces processed cheese	1 ounce of meat, poultry or fish, ¼ cup cooked beans, 1 egg, 1 tablespoon of peanut butter, or ½ ounce of nuts or seeds	Nuts (1oz or 3 tsp.), cooking oil (1 Tbsp. or 3 tsp.), salad dressings (2 tsp.), and fish (2 to 3 servings per week)

Ideas for Healthy Snacks

- Almond butter sandwich on a whole wheat English muffin
- Medium apple and a nut butter spread
- Baby carrots and hummus
- Plain yogurt or Greek yogurt, raisins, and chopped walnuts
- Assorted trail mix blends (nuts and dried fruit)*
- Smoothie with low-fat milk or orange juice, plain or Greek yogurt, ground flax seeds, chopped walnuts and fresh or frozen blueberries, strawberries, bananas or peaches

*Nuts should not be given to children under 4 years of age due to choking risk

Tips for Healthy Eating

- Provide a nutrient-rich breakfast. For children taking medication, offer the meal before medications are given (check with your child's doctor or pharmacist).
- Offer whole foods. Avoid processed foods that may contain sugars, artificial flavors, colors and preservatives.
- Decrease snack foods in the home that contain high amounts of sugars (candy, cookies, soda, juice boxes) and saturated fats (processed pastries, chips, chicken nuggets, etc.).
- Understand your child's appetite. Have nutrient-rich foods ready for meals and snacks when hunger strikes.
- Adjust portion sizes to meet your child's appetite. Some children can become upset if too much food is given.
- Despite popular belief, sugar does not cause hyperactivity. However, sugar does not provide nutrients, only calories. Reach for complex carbohydrates instead, for example, vegetables, fruits and whole-grains.
- Elimination diets (taking out most foods from the diet) to determine if certain foods cause behavior problems in children with ADHD, are difficult to follow (for the child and family). Seek help from your doctor along with a registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN) for more information.

Behavioral Health Nutrition

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More topics and resources available at bhndpg.org.

1. Phillips W. Nutrition Management of Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. *ICAN: Infant, Child & Adolescent Nutrition*, published online, 23 September 2014.