

Special Diets, Special Kids: What Your Doctor May Not Tell You, But Every Parent Should Know - a Parent Perspective

By Susan Goewey



So, what's for dinner? Good question. For the overwhelmed parents of children with special needs, it is daunting to sort through all the information about hidden dangers in the food we eat and how these dangers can affect our mental and physical health. Even before we make dietary changes for our "picky" eaters... just investigating our "special" kids' vitamin deficiencies, possible food allergies/intolerances is a huge challenge. It is so difficult to sort out and assess exactly what - in our environment and food supply - helps and what hurts. But for those of us who do delve deeply into the mystery... we're being rewarded with healthier, more alert, ready-to-learn children.

When my son, now 8, developed autism six years ago, Karen Seroussi set me on the path to finding the best diet for him. She wrote the ground-breaking best-seller: *Unraveling the Mystery of Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorder: A Mother's Story of Research and Recovery* (2000, Simon & Schuster). I read it until 2 a.m. and sobbed because it was so difficult to understand.

In her book, Seroussi reminds us that: "There are no symptoms without a cause." Though she warns that what worked for her son obviously does not work for everyone, she rightly points out that it is up to parents, we who know our kids best - not busy doctors - to persist in investigating possible causes and effects of health symptoms. The right dietary intervention (if we can just figure it out!) can help and even reverse many conditions. Among the symptoms that parents and doctors report can improve with special diets are both serious (seizures) and "milder" one such as constipation/diarrhea, dry skin, brittle nails, rashes, brain fog, yeast infections, allergies, tantrums, poor eye contact and much, much more.

In Virginia, we are fortunate in that we have a number of informed doctors and nutritionists to help guide us through the confusing maze. Also many excellent new books, based on research studies, are now available to educate us. This article is not intended to substitute for medical advice, but it aims to open your eyes to the possibilities for improvement in your child's

health. For a list of Virginia area doctors who offer supplementation and nutrition advice among their services, see thenote at the end of this article.

Basic facts parents should be aware of:

1. Modern society's over-use of antibiotics should be counter-acted with probiotics and prebiotic foods...Our immune system relies on a liberal helping of probiotic bacteria, or flora, which live in our intestinal track. Probiotics help us digest food, strengthen our immune system and fight off pathogenic bacteria strains, such as salmonella and e-coli. Unfortunately, when we administer antibiotics (i.e., for ear infections, etc.) they indiscriminately kill both "good" and "bad" strains of bacteria. Because antibiotics are everywhere (in foods, milk, soap, dry-cleaning, even the chlorine in our water is put there to kill bacteria), doctors now point to our body's reduced bacteria count as the culprit behind the dramatic upsurge in gastrointestinal (GI) disorders like irritable bowel syndrome and Crohn's disease. But we can break the cycle by eating pro- and prebiotic food sources and supplementing with probiotics. The strain of bacteria called *Lactobacillus GG* (available in many yogurts and in the supplement, *Culturelle*) withstands stomach acid, thrives in the intestinal tract and locks out bad bacteria. LGG emerged as the ideal probiotic in 1985 when researchers at Tufts University analyzed more than 1,000 different strains. An excellent new book, written by a scientist and based on numerous research studies is called *The Probiotics Revolution* by Gary Huffnagle w/ Sarah Wernick.

So, if your child will not or cannot eat enough of the kind of foods to replenish the "good bacteria" (and how many of us eat enough broccoli and cauliflower to do this?), consider supplementing their drinks with products like *Culturelle* and others found in the refrigerated section of health food stores or offered online through a company like Kirkman's.

2. Just say NO to certain non-foods listed on ingredient labels. Also say no to allowing any foods in your

house that list ingredients such as “high fructose corn syrup” or “partially hydrogenated” or “Monosodium Glutamate” or “artificial colors” (who knew those beautiful cupcake sprinkles were made from petroleum?!) These are not even real foods, but man-made chemicals that are not good for any of us, especially children with “issues.” The use of artificial “transfats” and “high fructose corn syrup” in our food supply correlates directly with the dramatic rise in heart disease, obesity and diabetes. Transfats are believed to be a major contributing cause to Americans' poor health; they have already been banned in Europe. To quote Mike Huckabee, who reversed his own type 2 Diabetes (and authored *Stop Digging Your Grave With a Knife and Fork*), “If it says 'partially hydrogenated'...it might as well say 'poison',” (See also: *TransFats, The Hidden Killer in Our Food* by Judith Shaw, Pocket Books 2004) Transfats not only clog arteries; many doctors believe that these non-foods (laden with nickel) actually interfere with the brain's ability to absorb the “good oils” the essential fatty acids/Omega 3,6,9s that the body/brain needs for healthy neuron functioning. And high fructose corn syrup is a “faux food” that harbors the bad bacteria that live in the GI and suppress the immune system, move to the liver and eventually the rest of the body. MSG is a neurotoxin. Be an informed consumer. Research these facts for yourself, and then just say NO. (So if you're feeding your kids yogurt, make sure you're not counteracting the probiotic strains by including high fructose corn syrup!)

3. Go organic to help get toxins out of your child's diet... Some doctors recommend going all-organic for medically sensitive patients, or at least go organic with the child's most frequently eaten foods and/or eliminating food that pesticides cling most stubbornly to, like grapes. (Be warned, because the pesticides now grow into the plant, no amount of scrubbing can completely remove them.) Understand that if you are not going organic, your child is consuming antibiotics, growth hormones and pesticides that his or her GI tract may have more trouble expelling than his or her healthy peers do.

4. Eat (or supplement) Essential Fatty Acids. Essential Fatty Acids - the omega 3, 6, 9s found in nuts and seeds, flax oil, olive oil and fish oils - must be taken in nutritionally as our body does not produce them. And they are “essential” for good health, especially good brain

and eye function. Dr. Mary Megson, a Richmond, Va., doctor who treats many children with autism and other developmental problems conducted seminal research on the benefits of Cod Liver Oil (See www.megson.com). Not only did parents report improved eye contact, some adult study participants with autism were able to verbalize how their field of vision improved, and explain why they no longer needed to look at people peripherally. Megson's theory is that the vitamin A oil improves, among other things, the rods and cones in the eye. I can personally report improved eye contact in my son. I recommend a “non-stinky” cod liver oil product - that is molecularly distilled to remove the mercury - by Nordic Naturals. It comes in several flavors, but the peach flavor tastes delicious, a little like a “fuzzy navel” in orange juice!

Sadly, not all fish is brain food anymore, due to the mercury it contains. If you eat fish, you should know which contain the least amount of mercury toxins. “It's really a shame we've polluted our oceans, rivers and lakes,” says nutritionist Kelly Dorfman. “In fact, it's now healthier to take molecularly distilled fish oil than to eat fish with high mercury levels, especially the larger fish like tuna and swordfish.”

5. Focus on the “superfoods.” Instead of eating what GI specialists refer to as “the typical American diet of goo and glue” - i.e, refined white bread flour and sugar - try to keep things moving along by eating “superfoods” - whole fruits, grains and vegetables - each day. Washington Post reporter Ed Bruske combed through health literature and compiled a single list that experts generally agree are the best nutritionally (See: *The 12 Best Foods Cookbook* by Dana Jacobi and *SuperFoods Rx: 14 Foods That Will Change Your Life* by Steven Pratt and Kathy Matthews.) That list includes: black beans, blueberries, broccoli, dark chocolate, oats, onions, oranges, sweet potato (or pumpkin), wild salmon, soy, spinach, green tea, tomatoes, turkey, walnuts and yogurt.

I keep this list on my refrigerator. You can make a delicious turkey soup and get at least seven superfoods at once. Whenever I feel a cold coming on, I nip it in the bud with my “Souper Soup.” I'm not sure why Bruske left garlic out, but I add it liberally.

6. Filter your drinking water. No matter that authorities reassure us that our tap water is safe, “special” children do not need any extra amounts of arsenic,

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aluminum, lead, mercury and other chemicals and contaminants (including the recent discovery that our tap water contains pharmaceuticals). Filters can help reduce these chemicals. While filters do not remove all the chemicals, they help. And remember to change filters often.

7. Consider going dairy-free/gluten free. The proteins found in wheat (gluten) and milk (casein) are very similar on the molecular level. In 1994, researchers at Georgetown University School of Medicine performed a study on 104 children with recurrent ear infections. They found that a third of the children were allergic to milk, another third were allergic to wheat. When parents were instructed to keep the children off those foods for four months, 70 children improved with significant ear clearing. But after the offending foods went back into the diets, within four months the ears were again clogged in 66 of those children! And many children with autism are responding well to a gluten free/dairy-free diet, including my own son.

The “why” it works is complicated and is based on the “leaky gut” theory (caused by an overgrowth of yeast, caused by anti-biotics) - a story too long to go into in this short article but that has been well told, as I mentioned, by Seroussi. Another more recent, famous example is Jenny McCarthy's son Evan. McCarthy describes their ordeal in the best-seller: *Louder than Words: a Mother's Journey in Healing Autism*. McCarthy also attributes her great success to a probiotic called Threelac (you can google it) that finally rid her son of the overgrowth of yeast in his system.

But no discussion of Special Diet for Special Kids is complete without a reference to Lisa Lewis, PhD, who literally wrote the cookbook on the topic. A gourmet cook, she stumbled upon remarkable improvement in her autistic son when she removed wheat (she had already removed dairy) from his diet.

For more about the rationale behind eliminating wheat and dairy and much more - read *Special Diets for Special Kids I and II*, by Lisa Lewis. Lewis and Seroussi together created the Autism Network for Dietary Intervention to support parents who decide to try going gluten and dairy free. Visit their website at www.autismndi.com.

8. All vitamins are not created equal. For an excellent discussion of which vitamins might help your child, depending on symptoms, and why, see *Healing the New Childhood Epidemics: Autism, ADHD, Asthma, and*

Allergies, The Groundbreaking Program for the 4-A Disorders by Kenneth Bock, MD, and Cameron Stauth (see also Dr. Bock's website at www.healing-autism.com and www.rhinebeckhealth.com).

Yes, it can be overwhelming, and you should get a doctor's advice for “mega” supplements. Nutritionist Kelly Dorfman who co-founded Developmental Delay Resources (www.devdelay.org) recommends that, at the very least, parents can opt to avoid sugary cereals (she recommends soup for breakfast) and other toxins; serve lots of organic vegetables, fruits and lean proteins; supplement with distilled cod liver oil; and give a daily hypoallergenic multi-vitamin in capsule form that is readily absorbable (She likes Kirkman's Every Day, see www.kirkmanlabs.com). But keep exploring, with the help of your doctor, the best way to improve your individual child's diet.

I know it sounds like a lot of work, but something amazing happened in my exploration of all this nutritional information to help my son. At first, in my grief and despair, it felt like a huge burden... and I grew weary explaining Luke's diet to family, friends, teachers, and even some disbelieving doctors. However, six years later, our new habits are ingrained and grocery shopping and food preparation are easier. Now, instead of a burden, our new healthy diet habits feel like a gift, a loving, positive act I can do for my whole family....one that helps cranky and tired moms, dads and siblings keep up our energy levels too! ■

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Note:

The Autism Research Institute (ARI), a non-profit organization, was established in 1967. For more than 40 years, ARI has devoted its work to conducting research, and to disseminating the results of research, on the triggers of autism and on methods of diagnosing and treating autism, providing research-based information to parents and professionals around the world.

ARI's Clinician Registry lists practitioners who provide biomedically-based treatment for children and adults with autism. Many of these practitioners are physicians, and others offer related services in healthcare. For a listing of practitioners working in Virginia and other pertinent information, see www.autism.com