

HOW CAN DIET HELP AUTISM?

I am often met with much confusion when I talk to people about how diet can help autism, and I must admit 12 years ago when I first started out, I had the same thoughts. How could changing my son's food change his behaviour?

To understand the power of dietary intervention on autism, we have to have a quick lesson in the gut and brain connection.

Autism used to be thought of as a brain disorder. Through the work of some pioneering doctors involved in the Autism Research Institute, autism is now beginning to be thought of as a "whole body disorder". Dr Martha Herbert (whose book *The Autism Revolution* is a fantastic resource) says the brain is "downstream" from the body.

Autistic children often have physical symptoms such as diarrhea, constipation, bloating, infections and sleeping problems. The fact that there are physical as well as behavioural problems shows that autism cannot just be a brain disorder. It means their digestive, immune & detoxification systems are not working properly.

The kids are not digesting the nutrients from the foods they are eating and there are also foods in their diet that may be causing more inflammation and problems.

So, changing diets has a positive effect on the biochemical processes and therefore helps improve behavioural symptoms which are downstream.

"All disease begins in the gut" – Hippocrates

Over the years, many scientists have described the gut as a second brain. Think of some of the terms we use all the time like having 'gut feelings' or being told to 'listen to your gut'.

This is because the gut has similar neurotransmitters to the brain, in fact, all of the major neurotransmitters found in the brain are also in the gut.

So .. what upsets the gut can upset the brain, and what upsets the brain can upset the gut.

I didn't get this at first, but just have a think about drinking alcohol - you take it into the gut but it sure has an effect on your brain!

Serotonin is one of our major neurotransmitters and it is the main neurotransmitter of the bowel. It also regulates mood, appetite, sleep and muscle contraction and pain sensitivity. It is involved in some cognitive functions such as learning and memory and guess what - 95% of the body's Serotonin is made in the gut!

The largest part of our Immune System – over 70% - is also found in the gut. The gut is our first line of defence for viruses and bacteria.

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So you can see the importance of having a healthy gut and how that flows on to all of our other systems and eventually to our brain.

“Leaky Gut” is the term used to describe when the gut wall is weak and permeable and it can allow incompletely digested food proteins (like gluten and casein) through the gut wall and into the bloodstream where they cross the blood/brain barrier and affect behaviour. The body mounts an immune response to these foreign bodies, as it does not recognize them in this form, they are supposed to have been broken down.

Gluten and casein proteins which are not broken down properly turn into opiate compounds – and produce opium like symptoms.

These peptides leak into the bloodstream and cross the blood brain barrier. These appear to the body like morphine and cause neurological problems. Many of the symptoms of morphine use are similar to autism symptoms – for example high pain thresholds and foggy thinking.

This is why gluten (the protein found in wheat and several other grains) and casein (the protein found in dairy) are usually the first food groups eliminated when starting dietary intervention, as they can be causing much of the opiate response. You will probably find that many of the kids have restricted themselves exclusively to foods that contain gluten and casein, as like opium, these become extremely addictive.

My son is living proof that the “whole body disorder” theory is true. Along with autism, he had eczema, asthma and constant ear infections, as well as ongoing diarrhea. All of these went away when we changed his diet. Not only did he get well mentally, he got well physically.

The thought of changing an autistic child’s diet can be overwhelming, but keep in mind the end goal of helping them achieve better health all round and with that an easing of the autistic behaviours that are downstream from all these broken processes coming from an unhealthy gut. You might just be amazed at what progress your child can make when the burden of toxins and inflammation from a sick gut are taken out of the equation.