

NUTRITION MATTERS

CAN FOOD AFFECT MY CHILD'S BEHAVIOUR?

Do comments like these sound familiar?

"You can tell when my kids have eaten sugar. It makes them bounce off the walls!"

"My child gets so hyper when he eats anything with artificial food colours."

Sugar, artificial food colours and other food additives are often blamed for overactive or "hyper" behaviour in children. Read on for more information.

Food additives

Food additives are chemicals that are added to foods to help make them last longer or to make them look better. Food additives can be natural or artificial. Examples of food additives include:

- Colours (e.g. Allura Red, caramel)
- Preservatives (e.g. potassium nitrate, calcium ascorbate)
- Sweeteners (e.g. acesulfame potassium, saccharin)

Health Canada has made improvements to the nutrition facts table and the list of ingredients on food labels. As of December 2016, food colours are to be listed by their individual common names (e.g. Allura Red) rather than using the word "colour" on the ingredients list.

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The food industry has a transition period of five years to make these changes. This improved labelling will provide consumers with more information and the choice to avoid foods with specific colours.

Research shows that there may be a link between eating a combination of certain food additives, and hyperactivity, depression or anxiety in children.

If you think a specific food ingredient is causing behavioural problems, you may want to test the relationship by eliminating any packaged food with this ingredient. Talk to a doctor or dietitian about how to do this.

Sugar

You may have noticed that your child becomes overactive or "hyper" during special occasions such as a birthday party, or social gathering. Some people think this overactive behaviour is caused by eating too much sugar. However, research shows that sugar does not impact children's behaviour or energy levels. Children's overactive behaviour is probably caused by the excitement surrounding the event.

- While sugar does not cause hyperactivity, it is still important to limit the amount of sugar your child eats. Here are some problems that may occur when children eat too much sugar:

- Foods high in sugar may replace nutritious foods needed for growth and development.
- Sugary foods can cause dental cavities, especially if eaten between meals.
- Sugary foods are often higher in fat and calories, if eaten in excess can lead to an unhealthy weight.

Caffeine

Caffeine is found in chocolate, coffee, tea, cola beverages, energy drinks and some medicines. Children do not need caffeine.

Too much caffeine can cause some short term effects such as irritability, anxiety, headaches and difficulty falling asleep.

CAFFEINE IN FOOD

Product	Amount	Caffeine (mg)
Chocolate bar, plain	44 g	9
Chocolate milk	250 mL	8
Coffee, brewed	250 mL	100
Cocoa powder	15 mL	13
Energy drink	250-473 mL	80-151
Hot chocolate, mix prepared	250 mL	6
Hot chocolate (fast food)	Small/kid's 236-286 mL	15
Pop (cola)	355 mL can	36-50
Tea (i.e. earl gray)	250- 354mL	40-50

Sources: Health Canada, Canadian Nutrient File. Date modified July 14, 2016; Product manufacturers; Caffeine in Food, Health Canada, 2012.

Maximum daily caffeine intake for children

Age	Caffeine (mg) per day
4 to 6 years	45
7 to 9 years	62
10 to 12 years	85
13 years and up	2.5 mg/kg per day *never exceed 400mg/day

Source: Caffeine and kids, Health Canada, 2013.

Other reasons for overactive behaviour

Most children have some difficulty paying attention, sitting still and having self-control at one time or another, particularly when they are excited or stressed.

If your child seems overactive or “hyper,” think about a few things:

- Did your child go to a special event such as a birthday party? If so, this behaviour may just be normal childhood excitement.
- Is your child not getting regular physical activity due to bad weather or other reasons? If so, your child may need to be more physically active.
- Is your child hungry? Being “hyper” may indicate a need to eat.

For more information and additional nutrition resources, visit www.york.ca/nutrition or www.unlockfood.ca.

To speak to a registered dietitian at no cost, call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000.

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