

Good Nutrition Can Lead to Better Academic Performance

"We are what we eat," said Hippocrates, the father of medicine. From ancient times to today, we have known that children who eat healthy meals today will be healthy adults tomorrow. It is through food that we introduce the most dangerous toxins into our bodies; therefore children who eat well can avoid disease in the future.

Additionally, an improper diet can also contribute to the development of Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), a developmental disorder that typically arises during childhood, which is characterized by a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity, as well as forgetfulness, poor impulse control, and distractibility. ADHD is currently considered to be a persistent and chronic condition for which no medical cure is available. ADHD is most commonly diagnosed in children, and approximately 60% of children diagnosed with ADHD retain the disorder as adults. An alarming percentage of these diagnoses are linked to sensitivity to food colorings, particularly of those contained in sodas and sweets.

In our current fast-paced society, children often do not eat properly. Many consume empty calories in the form of soda, candy, and desserts, while others eat processed foods that contain few vitamins, minerals, and amino acids. Furthermore, when one eats poor food, such as excessive milk products, processed flour, and other processed foods, the body is not able to extract vitamins and minerals from the food as well as it does from a healthy diet of fiber and complex carbohydrates. Poor foods cause the digestive tract to become inefficient in absorbing vitamins and nutrition, so eating poor foods results in a double-edged

sword against the body by providing inferior amounts of nutrition and inhibiting the body from absorbing the nutrition that exists within the food being consumed.

Sugar also plays a very important role in the hypoglycemic rebound effect that can lead to the first step of ADHD. If a child usually has breakfast around 7:30am and lunch around 1pm, it is important that they eat a snack in between these times in order to stabilize their insulin levels, which can effect their learning capabilities. It is important, though, that these are healthy snacks, such as juice, fruits, vegetables, and sandwiches.

What exactly is a good diet? This is a good question and one to which the answer has changed over the years as more scientific research uncovers new information related to proper nutrition. While in the past, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (USDA) once stressed a diet balanced by the four food groups, it is now recommending a diet that contains even fewer meat and dairy products than before. Some nutritionists feel that these recommendations are still not adequate and suggest adding nutritional supplements, lowering dairy and meat products even further, and increasing vegetables.

Let's look at the research to see how helpful a good diet can be. One ambitious research project affected over 1 million children in New York schools. First, the students' academic abilities were measured by a standardized test called the California Achievement Test (CAT). Next, with the help of the children's parents, changes in the children's diets were implemented over a seven year period. Synthetic colors and flavors as well as selected



Top: Prof. Adolfo Panfili speaks about nutrition during the filming at Marymount of a segment for RAI's TG2 program "Medicina 33." Bottom: Grade 6 student Matilde A., answers questions about her diet from RAI correspondent Annalisa Azzurro.

preservatives were gradually eliminated. High sucrose foods were also eliminated. During the third and sixth years of the study, no diet changes were implemented. The results of the study showed significant increases in achievement scores for every year that included a diet change and no increases during the years when there was no change in diet. Therefore, simple diet changes produced significant changes in achievement scores for the students of New York schools.

Based on other similar studies, we recommend a simple, sensible approach to diet, consisting of large amounts of complex carbohydrates (e.g., whole grain bread, potatoes),

substantial fiber from raw and cooked vegetables, ample amounts of fresh fruits, small amounts of meat, and avoidance of processed sugar. Processed foods and foods with artificial colors and preservatives should be avoided entirely. We also recommend vitamin, mineral, and some herbal supplements.

Parents at Marymount should monitor their children's diets at home as well, which will also lead to more effective study habits. Encourage and teach kids to eat healthy and be physically active everyday. Eat smart and play hard.

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