

ASK THE Expert

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Is there a connection between nutrition and an increase in TS symptoms?

I would love to begin answering this question by simply stating that eating peanut butter will make TS tics go away! Unfortunately, the answer is not so simple. Everyone agrees that good nutrition leads to good health. But many people wonder whether eating certain food products might lead directly to poor health. There is no disagreement that certain fatty foods can lead to high cholesterol levels and then to heart disease. But are there ingredients in food that lead to the physical and behavioral problems seen in TS?

It is universally accepted that TS tics wax and wane in severity, so it is natural to wonder whether what the person has eaten has led to these changes, especially when the tics or behavioral problems get worse. Some have wondered whether other cyclical events might lead to tics waxing and waning, e.g., a woman's menstrual cycle, differences in barometric pressure, and even the phases of the moon. The same question has been raised about ADHD and there are many anecdotal reports about individuals whose symptoms seem related to what they eat. There are two main theories about this: one, that certain components in food lead to the symptoms, acting in that individual like a toxin or poison, and two, that the symptoms are due to food allergies.

A wide variety of foods have been discussed as possible offenders in leading to tics or ADHD. Perhaps the first reports were by Dr. Feingold, who suggested that sugar and artificial ingredients caused the problems. This led to the Feingold Diet, which some people still feel is the nutritional answer to what causes ADHD and TS. But, other food groups have also been suggested including gluten and other dairy products.

Since what causes problems in one person may not cause problems for another, a combination diet restricting all of the suspected ingredients (gluten, dairy products, sugar, and foods with artificial ingredients) is tried by some people. Unfortunately, this is an almost impossible diet for most to follow, especially children.

The second theory is that a person can be allergic to any food, and that the allergic reaction shows up as tics and behavioral problems rather than as classical food allergy symptoms (cramps, bloating, diarrhea, and hives.) A person suspected of having a food allergy is given a series of tests and then put on an elimination diet to see whether the reintroduction of a specific food leads to an increase in symptoms.

Many doctors question the reliability of the tests used to diagnose food allergies. Moreover, following an elimination diet is a major undertaking. Complicating all this is the previously mentioned natural fluctuation in TS symptoms. This pattern of waxing and waning makes it difficult to know if the symptom changes are a matter of cause and effect or simply due to random changes. This difficulty applies also to trials of treatment with medication since the changes seen in a drug study may be due to natural variation and not to the effect of the medication.

So what should a person do? There is no easy answer. It is possible that a given individual is sensitive to a specific food ingredient, but there are many and often conflicting claims about which food to avoid. In my practice, I advise families to keep a food diary. If they believe that they have found a cause and effect relationship to a specific food, that food should be avoided for a period of time. The eliminated food can be reintroduced if it turns out that the tics and behaviors continue even when that food is avoided.

Are there supplements that can reduce tics?

Again, there have been a large number of personal, anecdotal reports about how certain supplements have led to an improvement in individual cases. Arguments have been made for the value of taking certain vitamins, minerals, enzymes, herbal products, and products from other organic sources (such as blue green algae, Omega-3 oil and grape seed extract). The dilemma is knowing which ones to take because the advocates for each of them all claim that their product is the one that works. Physi-

cians face the same problem in knowing what advice to give families. Health care providers traditionally base their recommendations on the results of scientific studies. Unfortunately, there are hardly any such studies to direct us to recommend one supplement or another. Another concern that makes many physicians reluctant to recommend specific supplements is the fact that such products are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), neither for safety nor effectiveness. Some of these supplements, especially herbal products, contain potentially dangerous contaminants. In addition, the strength of the product often varies from supplier to supplier, and even in batch to batch from the same supplier.

The TSA is eager to fund studies that will subject these products to the kind of scientific investigation that will determine which supplements make a difference. One study that is funded by the TSA and is in progress is the study of Omega-3 oil. When this study is completed, we hope to know for sure whether those who received the Omega-3 oil did better than those who received a dummy pill (placebo). I personally look forward to many more such studies to guide us through this difficult and important area.

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