

Nutritional Considerations for Autistic Populations

Gastro-Intestinal (GI) issues



As part of the Nutrition and Autism support series this help-sheet looks at the common digestive disturbances that can occur in children. It seems that GI disorders are more common within autistic populations and this can often be the reason behind some upset or reluctance around food. Imagine if you were being repeatedly offered foods that caused you physical pain but you were not able to articulate this? That can often be what it is like for children.

Constipation

One of the most common issues with children on the Autism spectrum is constipation and this can become a real issue if prolonged. There are a few reasons why this is widely an issue: -

- Constipation is generally common in children
- Constipation can be painful and children make the links and then often hold in their poo to stop it happening again
- This can lead anxiety in toilets and bathrooms
- It's more likely that children on the autism spectrum will have a more restricted diets which may make constipation more likely
- Children can forget to drink regularly or not like the taste of water.

- Children on the Autism spectrum may not recognise thirst – we look at interoception in the help-sheet on Food Routines and Sensory issues

A constipated child will almost certainly not want to eat and may find being offered food causes them anxiety. The general advice for constipation is to ensure that the diet is a healthy balanced mix including plenty of fluid and fibre. Fibre helps to maintain regular bowel movements and prevent constipation. This can be difficult in children who have a restrictive diet, especially if it is one that consists predominantly of 'beige food'.

It's important to offer plenty of fluids and to keep a journal of bowel movements, particularly any changes to these. Stressful situations can bring on changes to bowels, this can be something big like new sibling, house move or change in the family set-up, but stress is relative and something that may seem a small issue could be a huge issue to the child. It is often necessary to seek medical help with a constipated child and for children on the Autism spectrum this should include behavioural strategies not just laxative based medications.

GI symptoms

It is unclear exactly why children on the Autism spectrum are more prone to GI issues such as abdominal pains, constipation, bloating and diarrhoea whilst dietary restrictions may be the biggest culprit, there's growing evidence that stress impacts on GI issues just as much as the food we eat.

We understand the role of nutrition in GI issues, a healthy balanced diet will not only fuel the body but provide it with the tools necessary to help eliminate waste, reduce inflammation, balance moods and emotions. When the diet is restricted it can prevent these and adversely impact on the body and its' preferred state of balance. For example, a diet lacking in fibre will cause constipation, a diet high in sugar and artificial fats (processed foods) can increase inflammation in the body, causing joint pains, mood imbalances and potential future health risks such as Type 2 Diabetes and Cardiovascular disease.

The Gluten and Casein link

There are some myths that gluten and casein actually cause Autism. They do not cause Autism, but some children on the Autism spectrum cannot fully digest these or are particularly sensitive to them. Removing these from the diet has made improvements to those particular children. (For further scientific reading into those studies, there's plenty of research papers on line such as this one - 'Gluten and casein - free dietary intervention for autism spectrum conditions')



Julieta Matayoshi
Early Years Nutrition Consultant



Louise Mercieca
Nutritional Therapist

What are Gluten and Casein?

Gluten is the general term for proteins found in wheat, rye and barley. Gluten is sticky, helping to bind foods together and give them shape.

Casein is a type of protein which comes from cows' milk. If a child cannot fully digest gluten or casein, peptides can leak from the gut into the bloodstream. This can lead to exacerbated symptoms in those within Autistic populations, this is due to excessive opioid activity from these peptides and an opioid-surplus in the Autistic brain.

Avoiding Gluten and Casein

This is not easy to do as Gluten especially is everywhere! We have a specially designed professional kitchen here at TPNK which enables us to manage gluten and dairy (and all allergens) very effectively and all menu items are clearly labelled. For ease of avoiding products in the home please take a look at our Gluten and Casein swap-shop.

Here at TPNK we provide a healthy balanced and mixed menu to ensure there's plenty of choice for you to offer along with the repetition required to gain familiarity with foods but we appreciate it isn't easy to get some children to participate in the full menu. We advise you look at the interview with Charlotte Olson, author of Sammy's New Food Week and our help-sheet on Introducing New Tastes & Taste Expectations for some practical advice on increasing the diversity of a child's diet without unduly increasing their stress and anxiety around food.

