

FAB RESEARCH NEWS

13 February 2002 - BBC Website Diet can ease problem behaviours

Fatty acids found in many common foods may help to treat children with dyslexia and behavioural problems, say scientists.

The behaviour of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) was found to improve significantly after they were given a dietary supplement containing the fatty acids.

Scientists from Oxford University and London's Imperial College School of Medicine gave the supplement to children attending a special school in Northern Ireland. After three months, the children showed significant improvements in their behaviour and mental abilities. They were less anxious and less shy.

No such improvements were found among another group of children from the same school who were given a dummy supplement.

Common condition

ADHD - which is characterised by hyperactivity and an inability to concentrate - is estimated to affect up to 4% of the US school population.

Researcher Dr Alexandra Richardson said: "Abundant evidence points to the importance of specific fatty acids in brain development and function. "These fatty acids are often under consumed or under produced in children with behavioural and learning challenges."

"Our study reinforces the assertion that in some children, learning difficulties and ADHD-related symptoms are responsive to dietary supplements providing the appropriate fatty acids."

Independent nutrition consultant Dr Jackie Stordy said: "This new research provides the strongest evidence yet that some fatty acid supplements can provide enormous benefit to children with specific learning difficulties."

Baby diet

The findings lend weight to claims made last December when scientists suggested a newborn baby's diet can affect its mental agility at school.

Dr Peter Willatts of the University of Dundee said children fed infant milk with long chain polyunsaturated fatty acids (LCPs) found in breast milk had faster mental agility and were



more efficient in understanding and solving problems.

The fatty acids are found in oily fish such as mackerel, sardine, salmon and tuna, nuts and green leaf vegetables such as cabbage and spinach.

The research is published in Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology and Biological Psychiatry.*

FAB Research Comment

Much of the media coverage following the publication of this paper placed a misleading focus on 'ADHD', and this article is no exception.

In fact, the children in this study were dyslexic - and although they had all been selected for showing at least some ADHD features in addition, not one of them actually had a formal ADHD diagnosis. Furthermore, our clinical impressions indicated that only a few would have met formal diagnostic criteria for this condition.

This pilot study was the first controlled trial of fatty acid supplements in dyslexia. Our aim was to focus on the overlap between ADHD and dyslexia, because at the time, most of the existing evidence for fatty acid deficiencies concerned ADHD.

To measure treatment outcomes, we used the well-known Conners Rating Scales, which assess a range of behaviour and learning difficulties often associated with ADHD, but are applicable to any children.

* Richardson A J, Puri B K. A randomized double-blind, placebo-controlled study of the effects of supplementation with highly unsaturated fatty acids on ADHD-related symptoms in children with specific learning difficulties. Prog Neuropsychopharm Biol Psychiat, 2002, 26(2) 233-239.