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To eat or not to eat

We all know the importance of healthy eating for weight management and overall health but scientists are beginning to understand how diet also influences brain development and mental function. With poor nutrition showing an association with reduced academic performance and behavioural problems, it’s now more important than ever to optimise your child’s diet.

Let’s take a look at what the science has found:

**Food groups to include**

* **Essential fatty acids**, including omega-3 and omega-6, are essential for brain development and the prevention of cognitive decline. The body cannot synthesise these “good fats” meaning that they must be obtained from what we eat. Sources include flaxseed and some other seeds, oily or fatty fish, as well as some nuts and vegetables. If your child is resistant to eating these foods, a supplementary dose of quality fish oil such as krill oil will suffice.
* **Amino acids** are critical for healthy brain development and function. The brain uses amino acids to produce the chemicals involved in regulating mood, sustaining mental clarity, paying attention and boosting energy levels. A diet deficient in amino acids can result in depression and feeling tired or weak. About half of all amino acids are essential meaning they must be obtained from animal protein sources such as meat, fish and eggs, and/or plant protein sources such as soya beans and quinoa (pronounced keen-wa).
* **Antioxidants** can help to protect the brain against oxidative damage that leads to cell injury, aging and disease. Essential antioxidants, such as vitamin C, E and selenium, must be obtained from fruit, vegetables, nuts, seeds and grains. For a treat, choose quality dark chocolate containing at least 70% cocoa as this contains antioxidants called flavonoids.

**Food groups to limit**

* **Sugars, artificial sweeteners, colours, preservatives and artificial flavour enhancers** have been found to inhibit the development of new brain tissue and connections when consumed in high quantities over a long period of time. Children who consume diets high in sugars typically display hyperactivity, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and crankiness. The jury is still out with regards to artificial sweeteners but there is some suggestion that these chemicals are capable of crossing the delicate blood brain barrier and the long term effects of this are yet to be seen. Most experts recommend children only consume these substances in small quantities, if at all.
* **Hydrogenated or trans-fats** are not only harmful for the body but can also distort cell membranes and reduce learning ability. These “bad fats” are found in margarine, some baked or fried foods, as well as other long shelf-life processed foods. Most experts recommend avoiding trans-fats altogether and instead consuming monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats such as those found in olive oil. Another healthy oil choice is cold pressed coconut oil.

In the real world it can be difficult to feed your child whole, unprocessed, nutrient-dense foods all the time but it’s very important to limit their consumption of snack foods that contain little or no nutritional benefit. Consuming a “brain healthy” diet at least 80% of the time is not only beneficial for your child’s physical development but has also been shown to promote healthy brain growth, positive behaviours and learning development.