

# The Parent's Reading Library

## Food, Nutrition & Neurodivergent Children

### Section 2

## Mediterranean Diet

### Why this topic matters

The Mediterranean diet is one of the world's most researched healthy eating patterns. It is based on eating plenty of vegetables, fruit, legumes, nuts, seeds, whole grains, fish, olive oil and minimally processed foods, while limiting highly processed foods, sugary drinks and excess saturated fats.

Researchers have become increasingly interested in whether this style of eating may benefit children with ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions. While there is no evidence that a Mediterranean diet treats or cures ADHD, studies consistently suggest that healthier dietary patterns support overall health and may be associated with improved behavioural and cognitive outcomes.

## 1. The Mediterranean Diet and ADHD in Children and Adolescents

### Reference

Ríos-Hernández, A., Alda, J. A., Farran-Codina, A., Ferreira-García, E., & Izquierdo-Pulido, M. (2017). *The Mediterranean Diet and ADHD in Children and Adolescents*. **Pediatrics**, **139**(2), e20162027.

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-2027>

### Plain English Summary

This landmark study found that children diagnosed with ADHD were less likely to follow a Mediterranean-style diet than children without ADHD. While the study cannot prove that diet causes or prevents ADHD, it highlights the importance of healthy eating habits as part of overall child wellbeing.

## 2. Dietary Patterns and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: A Systematic Review

### Reference

Del-Ponte, B., Anselmi, L., Assunção, M. C. F., Munhoz, T. N., Matijasevich, A., & Tovo-Rodrigues, L. (2019). *Dietary patterns and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): A systematic review*. **Journal of Affective Disorders**, **252**, 160–173.

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2019.04.061>

### Plain English Summary

This systematic review concluded that Mediterranean and other healthy dietary patterns were generally associated with fewer ADHD symptoms, while Western-style diets were associated with greater symptom severity. The authors recommended more long-term intervention studies to better understand these relationships.

## 3. Mediterranean Diet, Human Health and Cognitive Function

### Reference

Martínez-Lapiscina, E. H., Clavero, P., Toledo, E., et al. (2013). *Mediterranean diet improves cognition: The PREDIMED-NAVARRA randomised trial*. **Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry**, **84**(12), 1318–1325.

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1136/jnnp-2012-304792>

### Plain English Summary

Although conducted in adults, this well-known clinical trial demonstrated that following a Mediterranean dietary pattern was associated with better cognitive performance over time. It provides important evidence that diet quality can influence brain health throughout life.

## 4. Mediterranean Diet and Mental Health

### Reference

Lassale, C., Batty, G. D., Baghdadli, A., et al. (2019). *Healthy dietary indices and risk of depressive outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies*. **Molecular Psychiatry**, **24**, 965–986.

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-018-0237-8>

### Plain English Summary

This review found that people who followed healthier dietary patterns, including the Mediterranean diet, generally had better mental health outcomes. Although it was not specific to ADHD, it reinforces the broader importance of healthy eating for brain health.

## 5. Mediterranean Diet and Neurodevelopment

### Reference

Nyaradi, A., Foster, J. K., Hickling, S., Li, J., Ambrosini, G. L., Jacques, A., Oddy, W. H. (2014). *Prospective associations between dietary patterns and cognitive performance during adolescence*. **Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry**.

### Plain English Summary

This Australian study found that adolescents with healthier dietary patterns tended to perform better on tests of cognitive function than those consuming poorer quality diets. It supports the importance of establishing healthy eating habits during childhood.

**Note:** Please verify the final journal details and DOI before publication.

## 6. Mediterranean Dietary Patterns and Brain Health

### Reference

Psaltopoulou, T., Sergentanis, T. N., Panagiotakos, D. B., et al. (2013). *Mediterranean diet, stroke, cognitive impairment, and depression: A meta-analysis*. **Annals of Neurology**, **74**(4), 580–591.

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1002/ana.23944>

### Plain English Summary

This meta-analysis reported that greater adherence to a Mediterranean diet was associated with better cognitive health and a lower risk of depression. While most participants were adults, the findings support the long-term benefits of healthy dietary patterns for brain health.

## 7. Mediterranean Diet and Child Development

### Reference

Sánchez-Villegas, A., & Martínez-González, M. A. (2013). *Diet, a new target to prevent depression?* **BMC Medicine**, **11**, 3.

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1186/1741-7015-11-3>

### Plain English Summary

This review discusses how nutrient-rich dietary patterns, particularly the Mediterranean diet, may contribute to healthy brain function and emotional wellbeing. It highlights the importance of lifelong healthy eating habits beginning in childhood.

## 8. Mediterranean Diet and Childhood Health

### Reference

Serra-Majem, L., Roman, B., & Estruch, R. (2006). *Scientific evidence of interventions using the Mediterranean diet: A systematic review*. **Nutrition Reviews**, **64**(2 Pt 2), S27–S47.

### Plain English Summary

This review summarised evidence showing that the Mediterranean diet supports cardiovascular health, healthy growth and long-term wellbeing. It remains one of the most widely studied dietary patterns in the world.

**Note:** DOI and bibliographic details should be confirmed before publication.

### What this means for families

The Mediterranean diet is not a special “ADHD diet”, nor is it a treatment for autism or other neurodevelopmental conditions. Instead, it is a well-researched way of eating that encourages a wide variety of nutritious foods and limits highly processed foods.

For many families, the Mediterranean diet can serve as a practical guide for improving overall diet quality. Small changes—such as offering more colourful vegetables, fruit, beans, fish, nuts (where age-appropriate and safe), olive oil and minimally processed foods—can help children build healthy eating habits that support growth, development and lifelong health.

### Evidence at a Glance

**Overall evidence:** ★★★★★ Strong

#### What research consistently shows

- Mediterranean-style diets are associated with better overall health.
- Children with ADHD are less likely to follow Mediterranean-style eating patterns than children without ADHD.
- Healthier dietary patterns are associated with better cognitive and mental health outcomes.
- Research does not show that the Mediterranean diet cures or prevents ADHD.
- Mediterranean-style eating is one of the healthiest dietary patterns for the whole family and supports long-term wellbeing.