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DHA omega-3 linked to improved literacy for ADHD children: Study

By Stephen Daniells, 23-May-2012

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Increased levels of the omega-3 DHA may be associated with improved literacy in children with learning abilities, according to a new study from Australia.

Children with increased levels of DHA in red blood cells had improved word reading and spelling and their parents rated their overall ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) symptoms were lower, according to findings published in [Nutrition](#).



"The present study adds to evidence suggesting that increased omega-3 PUFA intake can improve attention, literacy, and behavior problems in some children with ADHD," wrote researchers from the University of South Australia, the Queensland University of Technology, and the Australian Technology Network Centre for Metabolic Fitness.

"Given the growing body of evidence, it appears that children with ADHD symptoms and comorbid reading and spelling difficulties may represent a subgroup of responders to omega-3 PUFA supplementation that should be explored in further trials."

The study is said to be the first to evaluate investigate the effects of EPA- and DHA-rich oils compared with a control on ADHD symptoms in children.

Despite an association between DHA levels in red blood cells and literacy, the Australia-based researchers did not observed a direct effect of supplementation with eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA)-rich oil or a docosahexaenoic acid (DHA)-rich oil on literacy, cognition, and behavior, compared with children receiving a safflower oil control.

Intriguing, but...

Commenting on the results, Harry Rice, PhD, VP of scientific and regulatory affairs for GOED, the omega-3 trade association, told NutraIngredients-USA: *"Given the high prevalence of comorbid conditions associated with AD/HD, the results are intriguing and provide reason to believe that supplementation with the long-chain O3 fatty acids may be beneficial for some children diagnosed with AD/HD.*

"I would argue, however, that the impact may have nothing to do with the AD/HD, rather the comorbid conditions. That, however, is a discussion for

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Study details

Led by Dr Natalie Parletta, the researchers recruited 90 children with ADHD aged between 9 and 12 to participate in their randomized controlled trial. Children were randomly assigned to receive four 500-mg capsules per day of an EPA-rich fish oil (1,109 mg of EPA and 108 mg of DHA per day), a DHA-rich fish oil (264 mg of EPA and 1,032 mg of DHA per day), or a safflower oil (1467 mg of linoleic acid per day).

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After four months of supplementation Dr Parletta and her co-workers did not observe any significant differences between the groups for the primary outcomes.

On the other hand, increased red blood cell levels of DHA were associated with improved word reading and lower ratings of oppositional behavior, as judged by their parents.

In children with learning difficulties, the potential benefits of increased DHA levels were even greater, said the researchers with significant improvements recorded for word reading, improved spelling, and an improved ability to divide attention.

In addition, the parents reported lower oppositional behavior, hyperactivity, and overall ADHD symptoms.

The researchers did report that increased red blood cell levels of EPA were associated with improved anxiety/shyness, suggesting separate benefits of EPA and DHA.

Commenting on some of the inconsistencies in the literature, Dr Parletta and her co-workers noted that dose may be important, with the benefits of higher doses used in this study warranting further study.

"Given the low omega-3 PUFA intakes in Western populations generally, the variation in the diagnostic criteria between the studies to date and the recent evidence that DHA supplementation can improve sustained attention and frontal lobe function in healthy boys, future research should explore the benefits of omega-3 PUFA supplementation for children who have developmentally delayed school performance but not necessarily a clinically diagnosed developmental disorder," they concluded.

Source: [Nutrition](#)

Volume 28, Issue 6, June 2012, Pages 670–677, doi: 10.1016/j.nut.2011.12.009
"Eicosapentaenoic and docosahexaenoic acids, cognition, and behavior in children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder: A randomized controlled trial"

Authors: C.M. Milte, N. Parletta, J.D. Buckley, A.M. Coates, R.M. Young, P.R. Howe

Keywords: EPA, DHA, omega-3, ADHD

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Supplements are only part of the solution

Supplements such as DHA may mitigate symptoms, however, attention issues are only part of the problem. ADHD children often are deficient in memory, filtering distractions, task completion, etc. A supplement won't teach these requisite skills.

When faced with this at my school, I decided to try cognitive and behavioral programs. We used Play Attention (www.playattention.com) and ADHD Nanny (www.adhdnanny.com) with super results. I stumbled across them at an ed tech conference in Florida. We also used Earobics for auditory skills. Again, not a quick fix, but a great addition to supplements for a multifaceted approach.

Posted by **john glennon**
23 May 2012 | 17h43

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