

TIP SHEET

Special Diets



It is not uncommon for young children to have allergies or intolerances to certain foods like nuts, eggs, and even milk. Planning and preparing for snacks and lunchtimes can be a challenging task at child care. Along with parents, food services staff, and other members of the teaching team, you can help eliminate or minimize exposure to certain foods and accommodate specialized diets.

We're going to take a look at some of the more common "specialized diets" and review what the allergy or intolerance is and what the symptoms may be. We will also explore some strategies to help you follow through with these specialized diets in your child care classroom and centre.

Strategies to help you follow a specialized diet:

A daily communication book between a caregiver and parent can be useful for recording any changes in behaviour, accidental slip-ups in the diet, as well as questions or concerns about products the child may contact.

A special diet typically does not include any unusual supplements, invasive drugs, or expensive treatments. It is just a matter of knowing what

foods and food items are to be avoided and being aware of possible side effects.

Specialized Diets

Casein-Free Diet

Individuals on a casein-free diet have likely displayed an adverse reaction to casein, which is a milk protein.

Casein is most commonly found in dairy products, but it is also widely used in processed food and fortified products. Unsuspecting food items which typically contain casein include imitation sausages, soups, stews, high-protein beverage powders, fortified cereals, infant formula, nutrition bars, bakery glazes, coffee whiteners, processed meats, salad dressings, sauces, and whipped toppings.

Terms such as "cheese", "curds", "milk proteins", and "milk solids" indicate the presence of casein. It is also important to note that "non-dairy" does not always mean a food is casein-free.

Additionally, a casein-derivative (Recaldent) is used in some products like chewing gum. Cosmetics, adhesives, pharmaceutical, nutritional and

personal care products may also contain derivatives of casein.

Gluten Free Diet

Individuals on a gluten-free diet have likely displayed an adverse reaction to gluten, which is a wheat protein found in grains such as wheat, oats, rye, barley, spelt, kamut, triticale, and semolina.

Many processed, canned, frozen, or other packaged foods also contain gluten. Unsuspected food items that often contain gluten include candy, gum, self-basting turkeys, cold cuts or sliced meats, soya sauce, condiments, as well as prepared stocks and soups.

As well, be cautious about foods that have terms such as natural flavourings, flavour extracts, or spice extracts in the ingredients, as gluten may be used in the processing of these products. It is also important not to take the words “wheat-free” as evidence of an item being gluten-free.

When dealing with young children, it is good to note that envelopes, play dough, and school glue are likely to be hidden sources of gluten.

Celiac disease is a specific form of gluten intolerance, whereby gluten damages the small intestine and stops the absorption of nutrients. Diarrhea, stomach pain, and indigestion are typical symptoms. Individuals with this diagnosis are placed on strict gluten-free diets. Even the slightest contact with gluten should be avoided. Using separate pots and pans or tin foil on a grill can greatly reduce the chances of gluten-free foods coming into contact with gluten.

Alternatives to gluten include rice, corn, potato, tapioca, and soya products.

Casein and gluten are very similar structurally. It is likely that a child reacting negatively to one may also do so to the other.

Preliminary evidence suggests that some children have an inability to break down certain proteins

in foods (particularly casein and gluten), which affects their brain and may result in autistic behaviours. This information has not yet been scientifically proven. Additionally, many children on the autistic spectrum also seem to have difficulty tolerating corn, soy, egg yolk, tomato, oranges, red grapes, coloured fruits/vegetables, and beef.

Changes that have been reported in children with a diagnosis of autism who are on the casein-free/gluten-free diet include improvements in:

- communication (verbal and nonverbal)
- eye contact
- social skills
- attention span
- anxiety levels
- aggressive behaviour and mood swings
- coordination
- bowel movements
- sleep patterns

However, a significant amount of variance exists among individual children in terms of which skills (if any) improve, how quickly, and to what extent.

Feingold Diet

The Feingold Diet is a dietary treatment that may be implemented with children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. It is based on the belief that some individuals are sensitive to synthetic food additives, and that eliminating them from the diet can have a positive impact on learning and behaviour.

Ingredients considered to be synthetic food additives include artificial flavours, artificial colouring, artificial preservatives (anti-oxidant chemicals - BHA, BHT and TBHQ), and artificial sweeteners (Aspartame and Nutrasweet).

Almonds, apples, currants, grapes, nectarines, oranges, peaches, pickles, plums, prunes, raisins, raspberries, strawberries, and tomatoes may also be removed from the diet, as they naturally contain salicylates.

Special Diets, continued

Egg-Free Diet

Individuals on an egg-free diet may have displayed an allergic reaction to eggs or products that contain egg protein, or they may simply be following a vegan/vegetarian diet.

Food products that most likely contain egg protein include albumin, prepared beverages, creamed foods, frostings, creamy fillings, ice cream, sherbet, mayonnaise and other creamy sauces, meat or fish batter, pancakes, waffles, and puddings. As well, some baby foods, salad dressings, soups, cakes, muffins, cookies, pretzels, breaded foods, and breads most likely contain eggs or egg protein

Terms such as “apovitellenins I & VI”, “globulin”, “livetin”, “lysozyme” and “phosvitin” indicate the presence of egg protein. Also, avoid food items with ingredients that begin with “ova-” “or ovo-”.

Alternatives to eggs when baking include soy flour, Xanthan gum, unflavoured gelatin, water, tofu, or vinegar. Adding extra baking powder, oil, or corn-starch may also be successful.

Nut-Free Diet

Although many child care centres and schools are already striving to be nut-free, it is important for staff and parents to realize that this means eliminating contact with any nut product. This includes foods which may contain traces of nuts, or those made in factories manufacturing other products with nuts. Many food products now have warnings on the label.

Pre-packaged cakes, cookies, muffins, and other items found in the bakery section of the supermarket are not considered nut-free, even though they may not directly contain nuts or have a warning on them.

Products manufactured in completely nut-free environments are available.