

# ADHD, Protein & Diet:



## The Game-Changer for Focus & Energy

### How Protein and a Balanced Diet Support ADHD – Especially on Medication, Insulin Levels, and Sensory Challenges

If your child has ADHD and takes medication, you may have noticed their **appetite changes throughout the day**. Many ADHD medications **suppress hunger**, meaning children may eat less during school hours and then experience **evening hunger spikes**.

Food plays a crucial role in **brain function, energy levels, and focus**, and it also affects **insulin levels**, which directly impact **energy, mood, and concentration**. Additionally, some

children have **sensory processing issues** that make them more sensitive to certain textures and tastes, which can further complicate their eating habits.

In this post, we'll break down:

- ✓ **How much protein a child needs for optimal brain function**
  - ✓ **Why protein is essential for ADHD**
  - ✓ **How ADHD medication affects appetite and energy**
  - ✓ **How insulin levels influence focus and energy crashes**
  - ✓ **Why sugar and processed foods make symptoms worse**
  - ✓ **How to help children with sensory issues get enough protein**
  - ✓ **A meal plan tailored for a junior school child in South Africa**
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## How Much Protein Does a Child with ADHD Need?

The recommended daily **protein intake** for a junior school-aged child (6–12 years old) is:

- 👦 **Boys:** 19–34g of protein per day
- 👧 **Girls:** 19–34g of protein per day

However, children with ADHD may benefit from slightly **higher protein intake**, especially if they struggle with energy crashes or hyperactivity. A good target is around **1–1.5g of protein per kg of body weight**. For example:

- ✓ **A 25kg child should aim for 25–37g of protein per day**
  - ✓ **A 35kg child should aim for 35–52g of protein per day**
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## The Role of Protein in ADHD and Why It's Crucial

Protein is the **building block of neurotransmitters** like **dopamine** and **norepinephrine**, which regulate **attention, mood, and impulse control**. These neurotransmitters are **naturally lower in children with ADHD**, which is why they often struggle with **focus, hyperactivity, and emotional regulation**.

When your child eats enough protein, it helps:

- ◆ **Keep energy levels stable**
- ◆ **Support brain function and memory**
- ◆ **Improve focus and concentration**
- ◆ **Reduce hyperactivity and impulsivity**

### The Role of Insulin in ADHD

Insulin is a **hormone that controls blood sugar levels**. When children eat high-sugar or processed foods, insulin spikes **rapidly**, causing:

- 🚀 A sudden burst of energy (temporary hyperactivity)
- ⬇️ A sharp drop in blood sugar (leading to tiredness, mood swings, and loss of focus)

When insulin spikes, it also reduces the availability of **amino acids (the building blocks of protein)** in the brain. This **blocks important neurotransmitters like dopamine from doing their job**, making it even harder for children to **focus and regulate emotions**.

#### 💡 **How Protein Helps:**

- ✅ **Prevents insulin spikes**, keeping energy and focus stable
  - ✅ **Supports amino acids crossing the blood-brain barrier**, helping neurotransmitter production
  - ✅ **Balances mood and prevents extreme hunger or fatigue**
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## Children with Sensory Processing Issues and Protein Intake

Some children with ADHD also have **sensory processing difficulties**. These are not the same as being a “picky eater.” A child with **sensory sensitivities** may:

- 🚫 Dislike certain textures (e.g., eggs, meat, or fish)
- 🚫 Struggle with mixed foods (like a stew or casserole)
- 🚫 Only eat a very specific selection of foods

### How to Work Around Sensory Sensitivities

Instead of forcing certain textures, **experiment with alternative protein sources**:





- ✅ **Smoothies with protein powder** (blend with banana, peanut butter, or yogurt)
  - ✅ **Protein-enriched ice cream shakes** (blend full-cream ice cream with protein powder and milk)
  - ✅ **Nut butters and seed butters** (spread on toast, mix into porridge)
  - ✅ **Egg muffins or pancakes** (can be disguised with banana)
  - ✅ **Mince or shredded meats** (easier to chew than steak or chicken breast)
  - ✅ **Lentil-based soups or hidden veggie sauces** (blended for smoother texture)
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## The Role of Low-GI Foods in ADHD

Low-GI (glycaemic index) foods **release energy slowly**, preventing blood sugar spikes and crashes. These foods help:

- ✓ Sustain focus for longer periods
- ✓ Prevent hyperactivity caused by sugar highs
- ✓ Keep energy levels stable throughout the school day


Good **low-GI carbohydrate options** include:




-  **Vegetables** (broccoli, spinach, carrots)
  -  **Whole grains** (brown rice, oats, wholewheat bread)
  -  **Legumes** (lentils, chickpeas, beans)
  -  **Fruits** (apples, pears, berries – instead of sugary juices)
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## South African ADHD Meal Plan for a Junior School Child


This meal plan is designed for a **child who takes ADHD medication**, has a **low appetite during school hours**, and needs **sustained energy for focus and activities**.




### **Morning (Before School - Essential for Focus!)**

 **Goal:** High-protein breakfast to keep blood sugar stable, support medication, and prevent insulin spikes.

-  **Option 1:** Scrambled eggs with wholewheat toast and a slice of cheese (15g protein)
  -  **Option 2:** Greek yogurt with nuts and a drizzle of honey (12g protein)
  -  **Option 3:** Peanut butter and banana smoothie with protein powder (18g protein)
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### **Lunchbox (During School - Small, Easy-to-Eat Foods)**

 **Goal:** Light, nutrient-dense snacks that provide fuel without overwhelming their reduced appetite.


-  **Option 1:** Chicken strips with cucumber and cheese cubes (14g protein)
  -  **Option 2:** Trail mix (biltong, nuts, dried fruit – avoid added sugars) (10g protein)
  -  **Option 3:** Hard-boiled egg with Provitas and hummus (12g protein)
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### **After-School (Post-Medication “Catch-Up” Meal)**

 **Goal:** A nutrient-dense meal to **replenish energy after medication wears off** and support **neurotransmitter function**.

-  **Option 1:** Mince on brown rice with avocado slices (18g protein)
  -  **Option 2:** Tuna mayo on wholewheat toast with carrot sticks (20g protein)
  -  **Option 3:** Chicken and cheese wrap with lettuce (16g protein)
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## **Afternoon (Snack Before Homework or Sports)**

 **Goal:** A light, balanced snack to support **brain function for studying** or **energy for physical activity**.

-  **Option 1:** Banana and peanut butter (8g protein)
  -  **Option 2:** Cheese and apple slices (10g protein)
  -  **Option 3:** Handful of nuts and a glass of full-cream milk (15g protein)
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## **Dinner (Winding Down for Sleep)**

 **Goal:** A calming meal with **protein and healthy fats** to **support sleep and brain recovery**.

-  **Option 1:** Grilled fish with mashed sweet potatoes and steamed broccoli (20g protein)
  -  **Option 2:** Beef stew with butternut and brown rice (22g protein)
  -  **Option 3:** Lentil soup with wholewheat toast (18g protein)
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## **Final Takeaway**

- ✓ Aim for at least 1–1.5g of protein per kg of body weight
- ✓ Use protein smoothies and shakes for sensory-sensitive kids
- ✓ Focus on low-GI foods to sustain energy
- ✓ Limit sugar to prevent hyperactivity and crashes

Making small changes to your child's diet can **significantly improve their focus, mood, and energy levels**.

✨ **Would you like more ADHD-friendly recipes or snack ideas? Let me know in the comments!** 😊