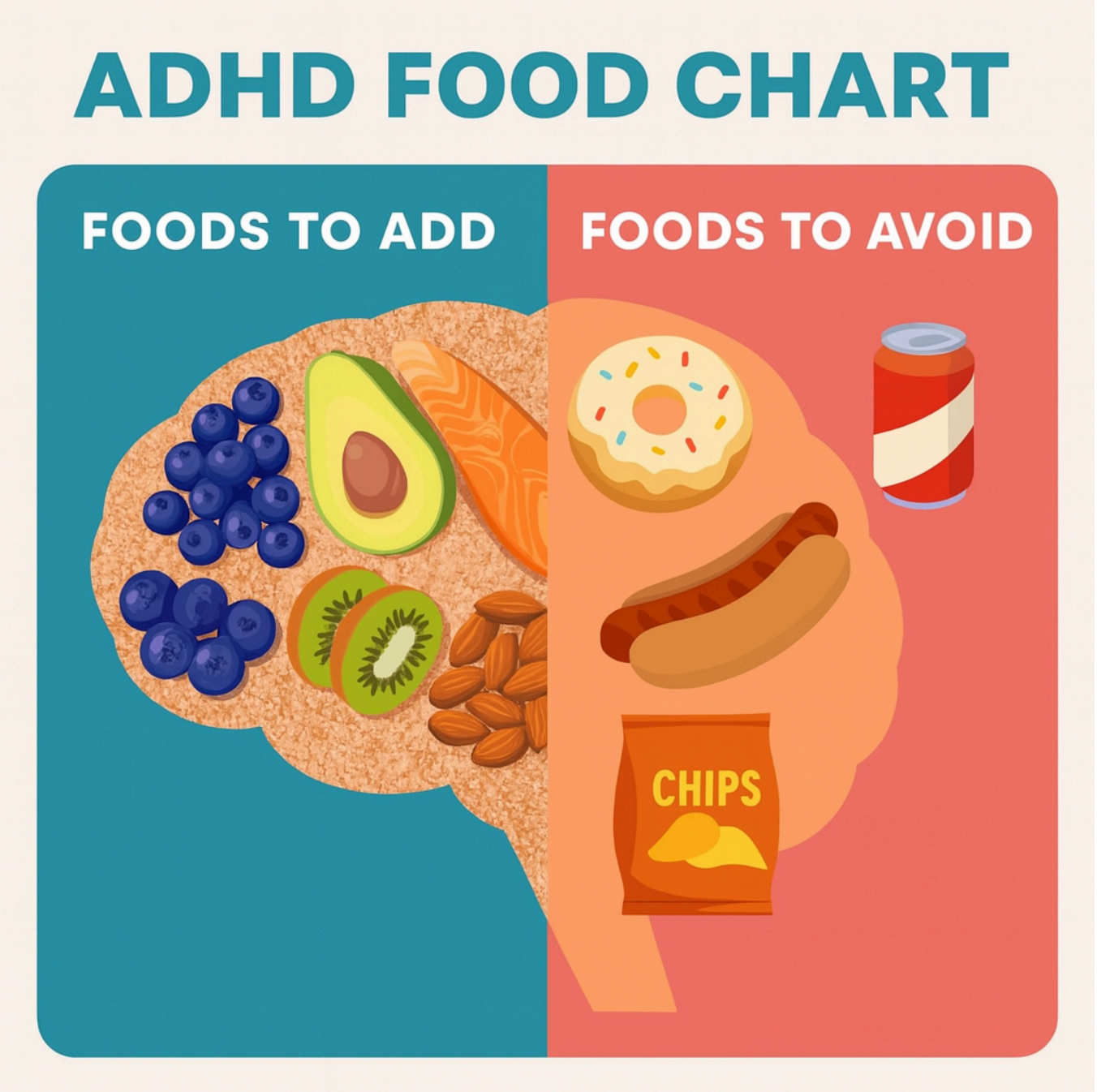

Foods That Help with ADHD: How Diet Shapes Focus, Energy, and Behaviour

Food doesn’t just fill hungry tummies—it fuels the brain. For children and adults living with ADHD, the connection between diet and symptoms can be striking. The wrong foods can leave you foggy, restless, or unmotivated. The right foods can sharpen focus, boost mood, and give steady energy to power through the day.

In South Africa, we're lucky. We have sunshine to fuel natural vitamin D, fresh seasonal produce at local markets, and a culture that values sport and outdoor living. With just a few mindful tweaks to the daily diet, families can create big changes in how ADHD symptoms show up.

How Food and ADHD Are Connected

ADHD isn't caused by food, but certain foods and nutrients can make symptoms better—or worse.

- A nutrient-rich diet helps regulate mood, focus, and energy.
- A diet heavy in sugar, refined carbs, and processed food can cause spikes and crashes in energy, leaving children irritable, inattentive, or sluggish.
- Some children are sensitive to specific foods, which can trigger hyperactivity or mood swings.

Power Foods for Focus

Most people with ADHD do better on a **higher-protein, lower-carb diet**. Why? Because protein boosts dopamine, the brain's "get things done" chemical.

- **Protein-rich foods**: eggs, lean beef, chicken, fish, nuts (almonds, walnuts), seeds (pumpkin, sesame), and cheese.
- **Smart drinks**: green tea, packed with gentle stimulants that help concentration without the jitters of coffee.

👉 A quick breakfast of scrambled eggs, a slice of wholegrain toast, and a handful of blueberries is far better for focus than a sugary cereal that leaves your child crashing mid-morning.

Essential Nutrients That Make a Difference

- **Omega-3s**: Found in salmon, sardines, chia seeds, and walnuts. These fatty acids support brain health and have been shown to improve attention and reduce hyperactivity.
- **Vitamin D**: Our South African sun is free medicine! Ten minutes outdoors can lift vitamin D levels. Also found in fortified foods and oily fish.

- **Iron**: Children with low iron are more likely to have ADHD symptoms. Boost with lean red meat, lentils, or spinach.
- **Zinc**: Supports brain function. Think chickpeas, cashews, and pumpkin seeds.
- **Complex carbs**: Brown rice, quinoa, sweet potatoes, and fruit give steady energy without the crash of refined carbs.

A Note on Overfocused ADHD

Not all ADHD is the same. Children with “Overfocused ADHD” (rigid thinking, worrying, stuck on negative thoughts) actually need **smart carbs** to raise serotonin and balance mood.

- Best options: sweet potatoes, apples, carrots, gluten-free oats, quinoa, chickpeas, and blueberries.
- Too much protein can make these children more anxious and stuck.

Foods to Avoid

Some foods make ADHD symptoms worse:

- **Sugary snacks and drinks**: linked to impulsivity and poor focus.
- **Artificial additives**: colours, flavours, and preservatives may trigger hyperactivity.
- **Processed meats**: hot dogs, polony, and sausages often contain additives.
- **Unhealthy fats**: fried chips, doughnuts, and deep-fried foods.

👉 Swap a fizzy drink and packet of crisps for sparkling water with lemon and a small handful of nuts—it makes a world of difference.

The Caffeine Trap

Coffee and energy drinks may seem like a focus booster, but in ADHD they often do the opposite:

- Reduce blood flow to the brain.
- Decrease the effectiveness of medication.
- Cause more side effects over time.

Start the Day Right

Breakfast sets the tone for the day.

- **Avoid**: pancakes, sugary cereals, muffins, bagels.
- **Choose**: eggs, nuts, cottage cheese, or a protein smoothie with fruit.

Children who start with protein-rich meals are often calmer, more attentive, and more motivated in class.

Smart Snacking

The “cookies and Coke” after school tradition is a recipe for disaster when homework time comes around. Instead:

- Apple slices with almond butter.
- Carrot sticks and hummus.
- Yoghurt with berries.

Snacks should fuel the brain, not sabotage it.

Watch for Food Sensitivities

Some children with ADHD are more sensitive to certain foods:

- **Gluten**: wheat, pasta, and bread can cause bloating, mood swings, or fogginess in sensitive children.
- **Dairy**: lactose can upset the tummy and affect mood in some kids.

- **Soy**: often hidden in processed foods.
- **Nuts/seeds**: while healthy, they can be problematic for those with allergies.

An elimination diet or food diary, guided by a healthcare professional, can help pinpoint sensitivities.

Final Takeaway

Food won't cure ADHD, but it can dramatically change how symptoms show up. A child who is bouncing off the walls after a sugary snack may be calmer, happier, and more focused with the right fuel.

Every family is different, but starting with:

- **More protein**
- **Smarter carbs**
- **Healthy fats**
- **Fewer additives and sugars**

…can set your child on a path to better focus and calmer days.

✅ If you'd like professional support or need more information about ADHD and nutrition, please contact Dr Flett at **031 1000 474** or visit our Assessment Centre at **8 Village Road, Kloof, Durban**. Remote consultations are also available via Zoom for your convenience.