

Sorry... but a diet won't cure your autistic child ([LINK](#))

By Dr Ellie Cannon, Daily Mail, UK, 1 November 2011

Autism is a disease that affects children, their parents, their siblings and almost everyone they come into contact with. And it is not hard to understand why.

Often, a contented, smiley baby will have slowly grown into a fractious, withdrawn toddler or young child. While other children start to become independent, the autistic child often won't speak, refusing to engage or even make eye contact – lost in their own world, staring, rocking, not walking without tiptoeing.

They are prone to tantrums, screaming fits and violent outbursts at the slightest change to daily routine, and often suffer from distressing bowel habits.

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Once a child is diagnosed – in itself, a difficult and often drawn-out process involving a host of referrals to psychiatrists and other specialists – families are often left to their own devices. They will have been told: there is no cure, and no treatment.

That is not to say there aren't practitioners who say they can treat, and even reverse, autism. And so, given the almost complete lack of hope offered by hospital consultants, devastated parents begin a treadmill of trying different therapies – often called interventions – they hope may help.

As a GP, and a parent, I understand how finding some glimmer of improvement can become all-consuming. Thankfully, in Britain at least, we seem to have moved on from the hope of a cure, accepting that those with autistic spectrum disorders may not be like the rest of us, but maybe a different version of normal.

The diet is very restrictive, which is hard in children with behavioural problems, where food and meal times may be a challenge. Restricting the diet of an already fussy eater can lead to dietary deficiencies.

However, one intervention that seems to have taken root is the gluten-free, casein-free diet (GF-CF). Gluten is in wheat and therefore is found in bread, pasta, pizza and biscuits. It is also in barley and rye and there is a similar compound in oats.

Casein is a cow's milk protein and is found in all dairy products, and a range of processed foods.

For more than 20 years there have been theories about the negative effects of gluten and casein on the brain and behaviour. It has been postulated that in autism and other mental-health problems, these compounds are not broken down properly in the gut and go on to alter behaviour, communication and brain function.

It is also suggested that some autistic children may have sensitivities to gluten and casein and are not digesting these foods properly: this would not only worsen their autistic features, but also cause bowel problems.

From a scientific point of view, this has never been proved. The authors of the most recent study on the subject concluded they could not recommend exclusion diets as treatment.

But three-quarters of parents with autistic children have tried a complementary or alternative therapy including restrictive diets: the main reason cited for this is that they feel there are fewer risks than with prescribed medications. However, the GF-CF diet is not a no-harm intervention.

Cautious: Parents with autistic children must be wary of looking for cures on the internet - there are none.

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The GF-CF diet can have significant physical health consequences. The lack of gluten and casein can lead to a deficit of calories, fibre, calcium and protein, affecting growth and bone density.

It is also a very costly diet as gluten and dairy-free alternatives are expensive. Despite these problems and the evidence against it, some of my patients find positive changes in behaviour and improvements in communication.

This seems to contradict the evidence, but it doesn't. Dr Richard Mills, of Research Autism, says: 'Symptoms of autism vary widely and change – sometimes seeming worse, sometimes better – within individuals. This means the true effects of such diets are difficult to quantify.'

Indeed, parents, trying out a raft of interventions such as the GF-CF diet, may find behaviour improves. But in the longer term, it can often deteriorate again.

Dr Mills says: 'It's worth trying, as long as expectations are realistic.'
For parents looking for advice, be wary of the internet. Avoid anyone who claims to have the cure for autism – no one does.

I wouldn't recommend the GF-CF diet but I appreciate why parents try it. I would be open to patients trialling, once the risks-versus-benefits have been discussed with a doctor.

But it should not be seen as a lightweight therapy. It is a massive undertaking.

LISA Comment: Comment on this article was quite controversial in the UK. We consider it is the right of all parents to seek answers, no matter what. Most parents could not live with themselves, if they missed something which might help their family member have a better life..