



Qigong Sensory Training Institute

## Parent Information on Decreasing Toxic Load

### What is Toxic Load?

We know there are low levels of toxins in our air, water and food, but our body is usually able to handle them without getting sick. We are also exposed to a wide variety of chemicals in our homes and schools. Up to a certain point, our body's systems for detoxification and elimination can get rid of the toxins that we are exposed to, and keep us in good health. This is the concept of *acceptable toxic load*: provided the levels of toxins don't get too high, we can get rid of them naturally and remain in good health. We can and do handle a small amount of air, water and food pollution without noticing anything. Above the acceptable toxic load, we get sick.

### Toxic Load and Autism

The concept of toxic load is important for parents caring for children with autism. Children with autism are not just immature in terms of physical and social skills; many have immature digestive and detoxification systems as well. Just as infants are more vulnerable to toxins, so are children with autism.

A small exposure that would cause no reaction in older children can make babies quite ill. Because babies have a harder time breaking down and eliminating toxins, toxins remain in their systems longer. A common example of a chemical that can affect the behavior of children with autism is the solvent found in dry-erasable markers. It is breathed in or absorbed through the skin, and can quickly create agitated behavior that lasts several hours.

There are two main areas where parents can make a big difference in the child's toxic load: the diet and the home environment.

### Decreasing Toxic Load in the Diet

At first glance, the idea of helping autism with diet may seem surprising. However, recent research is opening up the possibility of diet change as a helpful intervention for autism. Some children respond positively to changing their diet, and other children do not respond at all. Having said that, you won't know which way your child is until you actually try.

There have been recent research studies that show that preschool children have more behavior problems when they eat processed foods with artificial coloring, particularly red dye. Eliminating artificial coloring from your child's diet is a good first step to a healthier diet. To do this you will need to become a label reader. The most common one, red dye, is added to many processed children's foods. For information about avoiding synthetic dyes and preservatives see [www.feingold.org](http://www.feingold.org).

Studies suggest that children with autism frequently have underlying digestive problems that include enzyme deficiencies and inflammation of the digestive tract. If a child doesn't have the enzymes to digest certain foods, these foods tend to irritate the gut. Not only can this cause diarrhea, constipation and poor appetite, but problems with behavior can follow.

Elimination diets attempt to address the underlying digestive problems by removing the offending foods and giving the inflammation a chance to heal so that the gut can once again produce the necessary enzymes. Qigong massage helps the healing process along by strengthening the gut and clearing out the toxins on a daily basis. Later, when your child is stronger

from the qigong, you may be able to allow some of the offending foods back into the diet in small amounts.

### **Gluten-free/Casein-free Diet**

Research has shown that some children with autism improve on the gluten-free/casein-free diet. Children with autism are extremely resistant to any change and may be particularly resistant to diet changes. They often self-select an extremely restrictive diet high in gluten, casein and chemicals, sometimes eating only three or four foods, with hot dogs, pizza, and macaroni and cheese being frequent favorites. Parents are often nervous about removing dairy and gluten since these may be the only foods their child actually eats. They are afraid their child may starve.

If parents begin the QST massage program before they change their child's diet, the child will tolerate the change better, since qigong massage helps the child adjust to change, and improves appetite and digestion. Depending on how few foods the child eats, it may be easier to remove just dairy the first month, and wait until the second month to remove gluten. In some cases improvement is sudden and dramatic, but in others, positive changes may not be apparent for several weeks. Initially, in a minority of children, there may even be a temporary worsening of autistic behaviors for a few days to weeks.

Positive changes include more awareness of the environment, more eye contact, decreased self-injurious behaviors, decreased aggression, better bowel function and eating a wider variety of foods.

### **Getting Support for the Diet**

Talking with other parents who have already successfully implemented the same diet can be invaluable. They can act in a mentor role, providing tips regarding shopping, cooking, setting up the kitchen, etc. Furthermore, local support groups and the

Internet (e.g. Yahoo groups) can be very helpful for support, answering questions, and providing recipes.

### **Dairy Elimination Diet**

The suggested time frame for the dairy elimination diet is one month. Foods to avoid include milk, cheese, butter, yogurt, ice cream, and whey (a hidden ingredient in many pre-packaged foods). Suggested substitutes include rice milk and rice ice cream.

### **Gluten Elimination Diet**

The suggested time frame for the gluten elimination diet is four months. Foods to avoid include those containing wheat, rye, barley, oats, bread products (such as muffins, cakes, cookies, pasta, pizza and stuffing), and breaded items such as chicken nuggets and fish sticks. Gluten can be challenging to eliminate from the Western diet since many people eat it three times a day – cereal in the morning, sandwiches at lunch, and bread, pasta or pizza at dinner. Nonetheless, rice based cereals, breads and noodles can be found. If food is prepared at home, the diet can be healthy and balanced with no gluten or dairy at all.

### **Outside the Home**

Tell everyone with which your child has contact about the special diet, including family members, teachers, church school staff, daycare providers, and friends. Request their help in making sure that your child does not get inappropriate foods. The easiest way to ensure compliance is to always pack and send appropriate foods and snacks with your child.

### **Restaurants**

Restaurants provide another set of challenges. Many authentic Asian restaurants use little dairy or gluten in their cooking. Many use rice as the basis for noodles and other items. Western style restaurants, on the other hand, are heavily dependent on dairy and gluten.

## **Additional Diet Resources**

*Feingold Association:* [www.feingold.org](http://www.feingold.org);  
Extensive information and research studies regarding the role of synthetic additives.

*The GFCF Diet:* [www.gfcfdiet.com](http://www.gfcfdiet.com); A support group regarding dietary intervention treatment for autistic spectrum disorders. They confer with manufacturers and provide listings of permissible foods. Excellent pre-packaged gluten free/casein free foods and cooking mixes can be purchased from the website.

*Autism Network for Dietary Intervention:* [www.autismNDI.com](http://www.autismNDI.com); includes research studies pertaining to dietary interventions in autism.

*Special Diets for Special Kids* by Lisa Lewis, Ph.D. (available on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) and other websites)

*Gluten free cookbooks* by Bette Hagman and Carol Fenster, Ph.D. (available on [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) and other websites)

## **Reducing toxic load in the home**

We use many different chemical products in the home ranging from cosmetics and hair products, air fresheners, fabric softeners, bleaches and cleaning solvents, to garden chemicals. Children are exposed to these both by inhaling them, and touching them, and they contribute to toxic load. They can cause behavioral disturbances. These products are supposed to make home life easier, but actually make home life more difficult if the children start reacting adversely to them. None of these products existed sixty years ago, and people were able to get along quite well without them. It makes sense, wherever possible, to avoid using these products, and wherever possible to eliminate them or substitute them with alternatives using natural ingredients.