Study Looks at Omega-3 Fats and Brain Function in Autistic Children

By Greg Arnold, DC, CSCS, October 9, 2006, abstracted from “Omega-3 Fatty Acids Supplementation in Children with Autism: A Double-blind Randomized, Placebo-controlled Pilot Study” published online ahead of print in Biological Psychiatry August 22, 2006

Characterized by “a marked impairment” in social interaction, delayed language, and restricted patterns of behavior, autistic children frequently have serious behavioral disturbances, such as self-injurious behavior, aggression, and tantrums. From 1992-2003, the incidence of autism in the U.S. has increased by 435%, now affects 1 in 250 U.S. children, and incurs a worldwide cost of $90 billion each year.

With prescription drugs having “limited success” and natural alternatives being increasingly sought out to help with symptoms of autism, a new study has found that omega-3 fatty acids, found in previous research to maintain brain health, may also be helpful to autistic children.

In the study, researchers gave 13 autistic children aged 5-17 years either 1.5 grams of omega-3 fatty acids per day or placebo for 6 weeks. At the end of the study they used the Aberrant Behavior Checklist (ABC) to gauge the omega-3 fatty acid effectiveness on autistic symptoms.

While they found no adverse side effects in either group, the omega-3 group had significant decreases in hyperactivity and repetitive movements (called ‘steriotypy’) compared to placebo. After citing previous research showing benefits on brain function with up to 10 grams of omega-3 fatty acids per day, they found this study to “suggest that omega-3 fatty acids may be …effective and well-tolerated…in children with autism.”

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