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# Media Release

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## **Dietitians Raise Alarm on Alternative Food Allergy Tests and Dietary Autism Treatments**

Surfing the internet or wandering through the High Street who can fail to notice the offers of allergy testing and nutrition therapies for a wide range of behavioural disorders – particularly aimed at children?

The British Dietetic Association (BDA) is concerned by the number of children who are put through inappropriate tests and advised by unregulated ‘therapists’ to follow totally inappropriate diets. This may involve cutting out nutritious foods, which can lead to potentially dangerous shortages of key nutrients. To help people make up their own minds, the BDA has published two food fact sheets: allergy tests and a guide to diet and autism based on the latest scientific research.

Catherine Collins, Chief Dietitian at St George’s Hospital says: “I have been shocked to find a number of children coming to the hospital with serious nutrient deficiencies after being advised on inappropriate diets by ‘alternative’ therapists. At best, such diets have no effect on the syndrome they are reported to be treating, despite expensive tests and consultations. At worst they can be totally inappropriate and damaging to children’s health, both in terms of immediate health and long term growth potential.”

Allergy specialist dietitian Anna Carling agrees, saying: “Many of the allergy and intolerance tests commonly available on the high street and on the internet will suggest long lists of foods to be excluded from the diet. Excluding a major food group, such as wheat or dairy or a combination of different foods, creates many practical difficulties. Without good nutritional advice, a restricted diet can lead to poor growth and malnutrition. Children should not follow a restricted diet unless supervised by a dietitian as they require a well-balanced diet to ensure adequate development.”

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In particular, concerns have been raised about organisations and practitioners recommending dietary treatments and unreliable tests for children with autism or Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Paediatric dietitian Zoe Connor, of the Dietitians' Autistic Spectrum Interest Group, says: "Parents of children who have been diagnosed to be on the autistic spectrum understandably may want to try all available treatments to help their child. Unfortunately, nutritional advice from well-meaning organisations and alternative nutritional therapists can be expensive and cause great disruption to their already difficult home life. It can even be detrimental to their child's health. The approaches recommended range from taking large doses of vitamins to excluding various nutritious foods from their diets. It is common for children with ASD to be disrupted by changes in their diet, and often attempts to follow dietary 'treatments' fail, leaving parents feeling guilty and downhearted. As a paediatric dietitian, I do agree that in some cases dietary changes can help children with ASD, but none of them are backed up with enough scientific evidence to be recommended across the board for children with ASD. There are currently no tests available on the NHS, nor privately, that can reliably indicate which dietary exclusions will be helpful to individuals. To suggest otherwise is misleading the public.

"Dietitians would usually advise undertaking only one dietary change at a time, whilst supporting families to ensure their child's health and well being does not suffer."

Catherine Collins added: "At a time when nutrition is a profession lacking the rigorous checks and balances that apply to Registered Dietitians' practice, individuals wishing to pursue dietary manipulation should ensure that they only access the services of those uniquely qualified to make such adjustments. Registered Dietitians can help prevent potential nutritional inadequacies resulting from such radical changes. They can be accessed via your GP or hospital consultant to help you with safe, practical and evidence-based dietary choices."

- ENDS -

## **Notes**

1. The food fact sheets on Diet and Autism, and Allergy Testing are available at [www.bda.uk.com](http://www.bda.uk.com)
2. Media enquiries to The British Dietetic Association should be directed to Dr Frankie Phillips (0870 850 2517) email: [pr@bda.uk.com](mailto:pr@bda.uk.com) . Zoe Connor, Catherine Collins and Anna Carling are available for interview.
3. Autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) are common developmental disorders that affect the way a person communicates and relates to people around them.
4. The British Dietetic Association, founded in 1936, is the professional Association for registered dietitians in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is the nation's largest organisation of food and nutrition professionals with over 5,000 members. About two-thirds of members are employed in the National Health Service. The remaining members work in education, industry, research, sport settings or freelance. Registered dietitians hold the only legally recognised graduate qualification in nutrition and dietetics. They are experts in interpreting and translating the science of nutrition into practical ways of promoting nutritional well-being, disease treatment and the prevention of nutrition-related problems. Their advice is sound and based on current scientific evidence. Registration, awarded by the Health Professionals Council, is an indication that a dietitian is fit to practise and is working within an agreed statement of conduct.
5. For further details about The British Dietetic Association, please visit our website: [www.bda.uk.com](http://www.bda.uk.com)  
Also, see our Weight Wise website with some great information put together by registered dietitians specifically for consumers at: [www.bdaweightwise.com](http://www.bdaweightwise.com)