



RESOURCE BOOKLETS for Kinship Carers

Diet, nutrition and wellbeing

carer • KAFÉ





GPV/KCV acknowledges the peoples of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners of our great land and offers respect to Elders, past and present.

GPV/KCV acknowledges that the Aboriginal culture existed in Australia before European settlement and consisted of many community groups. Further, we acknowledge the Indigenous peoples of this land as the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

GPV/KCV acknowledges that laws and policies of the past have inflicted grief and suffering on our fellow Australians and regrets the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

GPV/KCV believes that a society that is inclusive of all is crucial to individual and community wellbeing and will behave with respect towards all irrespective of their race, religion, sexuality, gender or socio-economic background.

GPV/KCV acknowledges 13th of February as National Apology Day, the anniversary of then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, delivering the National Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples in 2008. GPV/KCV will take steps that promote a happier and healthier future for Indigenous Australians, particularly the children and young people.

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Key words which influence GPV/KCV approaches are: Truthfulness, Confidentiality, Inclusiveness, Integrity, Constancy, Gratitude, Commitment, Compassion

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ADAPTATION of a PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Diet, nutrition and wellbeing – from a podcast addressed to kinship carers

This podcast was recorded and produced on Djara Country, the land of the Dja Dja Wurrung people, and we extend our ongoing respect to all Kulin Nation peoples, the traditional custodians of these lands and pay respect to the elders both past and present and to the deep knowledge of the land that is embedded within the indigenous communities.

What are the latest trends in nutrition? What does the latest research say about what and how we should eat? What should the children in our care, in particular, neurodiverse, trauma-affected children, eat?

In this podcast, we seek out expert opinion on a broad range of current topics regarding nutrition and answer some common questions from carers.

We spoke with Nikki Valentini, a clinical nutritionist and functional medicine practitioner and director of Supernature Nutrition, about the latest trends and research on diet and nutrition.

Nikki is an avid cook and has catered for wellness retreats for more than 10 years. Good food is her passion. We asked Nikki how important she believes diet and nutrition is to our overall wellbeing.

NV – Diet and nutrition affects wellbeing in so many different ways. It affects vitality, energy, mood, as well as physical and digestive health.

Different nutrients specifically affect different aspects of wellbeing – if these nutrients are depleted in the body, then those areas will suffer.

For example, mood is often impacted by certain amino acids and B vitamins, as well as energy levels. Having balance in your diet and nutrition is so important in wholistic wellbeing; in the current day many imbalances come from eating too many refined carbohydrates. This plays a big role in preventing the absorption of all the good nutrients and hence the disturbing of our digestive homeostasis.

Many kinship carers have neurodiverse children in their care, whether that be children with autism, ADHD, FASD or some other trauma-related condition, learning ability, self control or memory issue. Nicki spoke about the links between these conditions and gut health, and she suggests some ways in which carers can help young people and children incorporate more balanced nutritional food in their diets.

NV – Essentially, in a neurotypical body our brain feeds off the components of the food that we eat and receives information from these nutrients. In terms of ADHD and autism, the messaging that the brain receives is scrambled, as the nutrients aren't available for the messaging to follow the typical path.



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The brain is connected to the gut via the vagus nerve and the enteric nervous system (a system of neurons that governs the function of the gastrointestinal tract). There is a small nerve that flows from the centre of the brain right down to the gut. When the gut is happy and it is absorbing the nutrients that the body needs, the brain will receive positive signalling.

Other signals the body uses in digestion are chemicals such as serotonin, which is a calming neurotransmitter.¹ This is produced in the gut through consumption of well-balanced or whole foods. If we think of ADHD in particular, it's serotonin that calms the nerve superhighway or vagus nerve, running from our brain to our gut. Think of it like an electrical cable that's running along under the road. Electrical cables can only hold so much electricity or else they'll actually fray and explode. It's kind of the same through the vagus nerve with the signalling from brain to the gut. Serotonin soothes all the frays.

If we're producing enough neurotransmitters and absorbing enough nutrients, the signalling to our brain is calmer and clearer. In turn, the processing in the brain is more stable too.

One other factor to consider is that toxicity in the environment can block signalling, no matter how well you're eating. It's quite a nuanced area of research in regards to ADHD and autism, there is an increasing amount of information available out there.

When assessing a person I first look at diet and nutrition to ensure that there's nothing stimulating the brain in a way that it can't process, and then I work from there.

When working with children on the spectrum, I often proceed very slowly because there are not only sensory issues surrounding food but also other things in daily life, such as clothing and labels. Change to typical routine, including diet, can be quite overwhelming for children and carers so it's important to start with small steps.

I'm not anti-vegetarian, but having a good amount of protein means you compensate less with the carbohydrates and gluten I mentioned earlier. Gluten is excitatory for the brain – it blocks the calming receptors in the brain and it frays the signalling again and again. The more protein you have, the less you need the carbohydrates. In a vegetarian diet, good protein sources can include tofu or bone broth-based soups or eggs. Good quality protein powders or collagen supplements mixed in smoothies are a good way to start incorporating extra protein into children's diets.

Many people make meals they are familiar with and stick to, especially in times of stress. Nikki discusses some common eating habits which many people would benefit from changing.

NV – The most common dietary habits amongst my clients are addictions to gluten and sugar. However, I don't always ask people to quit sugar, as that's not always the main issue, but the addiction to sugar and gluten is intense. Some people tell me, 'I ate wheat bix for breakfast, a sandwich for lunch and pasta for dinner.' The easiest way to lower your intake of these things is to eat more protein.

¹ Neurotransmitters are signalling molecules that relay messages between brain cells (neurons) and enable the brain to function.



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I often get people to change the way the meal works. For instance, if you're eating a Bolognese pasta, as a start, can you have more sauce than pasta? Or, can you have it on a potato? Because even that's slightly better.

Gluten and sugar are the biggest issues. I often feel like I'm going around in circles, telling people the same thing, particularly about gluten. This is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but gluten doesn't work for most people.

The idea of intermittent fasting or restricting the times of the day when we allow ourselves to eat has become a popular item on our news feeds. Nikki speaks about the benefits or otherwise of fasting and questions whether it is the right approach for everyone.

NV – Intermittent fasting is great – for some for some people and circumstances.

If you are under a lot of stress, however, it's not necessarily a great idea because fasting actually causes more adrenal stress. Adrenal stress produces a cascade of issues in the body, especially if your fight/flight response is elevated consistently.

Adrenal stress and your fight/flight response is triggered by perceived threats to your body, this can be an external stimulus such as a threat to run away from, but it can also be internal. If you're underfed or starving yourself for a period of time, after which you'll allow yourself to eat, your adrenals will activate because your body perceives this as a survival moment. Whether intermittent fasting works for you will depend on numerous factors such as your age and your body weight, but I wouldn't suggest a lot of intermittent fasting for someone who is already under a lot of stress.

As a woman, I don't suggest a lot of intermittent fasting. You could possibly do it on week two of your cycle, because this is a period where your hormones are levelling out and they'll manage it. But the rest of the month is not a great time for fasting because it will affect the balance in your hormones. Good advice to any woman who is trying to maintain her hormone levels and/or having any issues with her cycle is that it is more beneficial to eat a protein-rich breakfast to assist in levelling out her hormones – it's absolutely incredible how that works.

I also find that some people will starve themselves until midday or two in the afternoon, meaning the insulin receptors in their body are in starvation mode and stimulating glycogen to be broken down and dumped from the muscles, therefore spiking blood sugar levels. A lot of people who have restricted themselves in the morning get to night time and think they can eat as much as they like and crave something sweet after dinner as well. This results in a high glycaemic load just before going to bed.

If you're in a calm place and getting sufficient protein and calories in your eating window, as a male, intermittent fasting is okay. However, I often see that most people are too stressed to intermittent fast properly. In the short term people may feel great from restricting their eating window but in the long term you can mess with other parts of your blood sugar and hormones.



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How important is chewing our food properly and eating slowly and consciously?

NV – *The first thing that stimulates the process of our digestion is smell. When we're cooking or around fragrant food, we inhale the smell and this promotes the production of saliva in our mouth – this is the first stage of breaking down the food. This then stimulates the production of acid in the stomach, which in turn triggers the liver and pancreas to release enzymes.² These are all important mechanisms and secretions in digestion that are triggered consecutively. If you rush your food, one of these mechanisms may not turn on and result in incomplete breakdown and absorption of nutrients.*

These secretions pulverise your food into small particles, which when passing through your small intestine, are absorbed. If the food isn't broken down enough, it won't get absorbed properly, and can also cause irritation in the gut. Chewing slowly and eating mindfully is important for our digestion.

Nikki is a firm believer in making sure people start their day with a good amount of protein. She tells us why this is important as we age.

NV – *For females, particularly those beyond their 30s, the answer is protein.*

As I've mentioned, amino acids are the building blocks of our detox pathways, they're the building blocks of our muscles, and the building blocks of our enzymes. Enzymes aren't only made from protein, they are proteins that are essential in breaking down food and ensuring our cells function properly. Therefore, it is vitally important that amino acids are available in abundance in the body, and in a form that we can absorb.

A good protein breakfast could be a smoothie with protein such as an egg or a good quality protein powder. If you suddenly get hungry an hour later, that's your body telling you that that's not the breakfast for you.

Eating bacon and eggs without toast can also be a good option. Removing the white bread can help to decrease the complex carbohydrate intake. People often find that they won't get hungry for longer if they have something like eggs and bacon. Another option for males is a good granola or muesli with a variety of nuts and seeds.

Some people advocate for sausages or even steak for breakfast, I don't mind that at all. You can almost turn your day on its head by having a protein rich 'dinner' for breakfast – that's quite a good choice because that will level you out.

It can seem like every year there is a new wonder diet to follow, and there is a confusing amount of information available to us via the Internet and other media. Nikki has some great advice on trying out new food fads.

² Enzymes are proteins that help to speed up essential chemical reactions in our body.

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NV – If you read something regarding diet or food that appeals to you – for instance about intermittent fasting – ensure you educate yourself about both sides of the argument. Nutrition affects people in different ways, meaning that what works for others might not work for you, so read broadly.

When making changes to your diet, ensure you really think about how you feel throughout the beginning stages. Often people feel good when they make a change. Making changes is great – if you make one change you will feel different. It will happen, particularly if it's a foundational thing like sugar.

I often suggest when presented with fad diets, that moderation is better. Over time our internal signalling has become confused with sugar and carb cravings, so we can be confused about how we actually feel. You might think 'Oh yeah, I ate it and felt better cause I had energy for a moment, but actually I felt crap later.' You've got to observe how it is for you in the longer term, rather than just in that moment or for that week.

Another piece of advice is to eat whole foods, to refrain from eating a lot of food from packets. You'll take up much more from food that your body can recognise. Don't leave a lot of food or things inside yourself that your body doesn't recognise – it's junk. Even going to the fish and chip shop is better than eating a packaged food with ingredients composed of numbers and fillers.

So the takeaway messages from our conversation with Nikki on diet and nutrition are as follows.

Work on the 80 to 20 rule, with 80% of what you eat being healthy food, whole foods and foods your grandmother would recognise. Avoid foods with additives and fillers. Neurodiverse children or those affected by trauma can benefit greatly from a healthy diet free of these additives.

As well as gluten-free and sugar-free alternatives, include some protein in every meal and aim to eat your food slowly and consciously to digest it better and enjoy it more. Aim to eat a variety of plant-based foods and try to cut down on your amount of sugar and gluten. Our typical diets in this country mean we consume far too much of these two.

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