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Clinical trial studies impact of ketogenic diets on epilepsy

By THOMAS H. MAUGH II
Los Angeles Times

The first clinical trial of a ketogenic diet — high in fats and low in carbohydrates and protein — to treat epilepsy has shown that it sharply curtails seizures. It is also an effective tool for managing seizures children who are resistant to anti-epilepsy drugs.



The diet mimics the effects of starvation and induces the body to produce chemicals called ketone bodies rather than glucose as an energy source for the brain. Researchers are not sure why ketone bodies appear to reduce seizures.

The diet, which has four times as many calories from fats as from carbohydrates and protein, was developed in the early 1900s when the only treatments available for seizures were harsh and ineffective drugs, such as phenobarbital and potassium bromide.

The diet fell out of use with the development of more effective and gentler epilepsy drugs, but interest was renewed in the 1990s with publicity surrounding Hollywood producer Jim Abrahams' son, whose severe epilepsy was effectively controlled by the diet.

There have been many observational and retrospective studies of the procedure but never a randomized double-blind trial, which is considered the gold standard for assessing efficacy.

In the new study, physician J. Helen Cross of the Great Ormond Street Hospital in London and her colleagues enrolled 145 children, ages 2 to 16, who were having at least seven seizures a week and who were not responding to anti-epilepsy drugs. They were randomly assigned to receive the ketogenic diet or a normal diet for three months, at which point those on the normal diet were switched to the treatment diet.

After several children dropped out for various reasons, there were 54 children in the diet group and 49 in the control group.

The team reported in the online edition of the journal *Lancet Neurology* that the number of seizures dropped by more than a third in the group receiving the ketogenic diet, while the seizures rose by more than a third in the control group.

Twenty-eight of the 54 children in the diet group had more than a 50 percent reduction in seizures, compared with four of the 49 children in the control group.

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