JOHANNESBURG mother Heather Picton may not have had a well-researched fish oil supplement when her son got into difficulties at school, but she applied the “diet and fatty acids” approach anyway, and the results couldn’t have been more astonishing.

“At age 14 I never thought my son would get his Grade 8, but then he was accepted into the science faculty at the University of the Witwatersrand when he left school,” says Picton, vice-chairperson and founder of the Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Support Group of Southern Africa.

Too many people, she says, do not understand the importance of the correct levels of fatty acids in the diet, and consequently in the body, and she admits the availability of convenience foods doesn’t help parents make the correct choices.

She knows all too well today’s world in which parents are constantly bombarded with nightmare threats of Attention Deficit Disorder, dyslexia and dyspraxia.

And it is in this ongoing debate over how best to help improve children’s concentration and learning capacity, that omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids have become watchwords.

Picton says she first learnt about eye q, a fish oil supplement that has shown amazing results in trials in schools in the United Kingdom, in 2004, and says that while it doesn’t promise that every child will start functioning at 100%, it does promise improvement.

“And if a child is functioning at 40% say, and you boost that to 55%, the result is amazing, and what benefits most is their self-esteem,” she says.

Fatty acids, found in oily fish, green leafy vegetables, some nuts and seeds, as well as other food, help in the production of something called phospholipids, complex fat molecules that apparently can improve the brain’s messaging system.

South Africa is unlikely to be any different, if not perhaps worse off, than the United Kingdom where the Food Standards Agency says that seven out of every 10 people don’t eat fish at all, in spite of the well-publicised health benefits.

And the experts are almost unanimous in the advice that if parents are worried that their children are not getting adequate levels of these fatty acids from their diet, supplements should be considered.

The difference in children taking eye q may be easily explained in terms of the boost to their omega fatty acids; the key long chain fatty acids play an important role in maintaining optimal eye and brain function. And nearly a third of the tissues of the eye and brain are comprised of these long chain fatty acids which the body manufactures from other essential fats, that can only be derived from an external dietary source.

So basically, if you have a deficiency in your diet of these “precursor” fatty acids, you won’t be able to create the specific fatty acids vital for optimal eye and brain function.

According to Equazen product manager at Arctic Healthcare, Distributors of eye q in South Africa Sally Carstens, eye q contains a pharmaceutical-grade marine lipid uniquely formulated to contain a naturally-high level of active Omega 3 fatty acid, eicosapentaenic acid, or simply EPA.

The oil is made from the flesh of sardines and pilchards farmed from seas known to have very low pollution levels.

But it's not necessary to just take hers or anyone else's word for it, because major studies have proved eye q's efficacy beyond reasonable doubt.

Paediatrics, the official journal of the American Academy of Paediatrics, last year reported the findings of the Oxford-Durham study, a randomised, controlled trial of dietary supplementation with fatty acids in children with developmental co-ordination disorder.

The UK study reported that this disorder affected 5% of school-aged children there, and that other than the obvious consequences of deficits in motor function, the condition is also associated commonly with difficulties with learning, behaviour, and psycho-social adjustment that persists into adulthood.

The researchers pointed to mounting evidence suggesting that a relative lack of certain polyunsaturated fatty acids could contribute to related neuro-developmental and psychiatric disorders, such as dyslexia and ADHD.

This study took in 117 children, aged five to 12, and all with the disorder. The diets of one group were supplemented with eye q for three months, in parallel with the other group which got placebos, before a cross-over for the children on placebos who then went on to the active treatment for the following three months.

The researchers saw "significant improvements" in those children on active treatment in terms of reading, spelling and behaviour.

After the children getting placebos were swopped to active treatment, similar changes were observed, while those already improving on active treatment from the start, either maintained their progress, or improved even further.

The manufacturers followed that up with the largest-ever classroom trial, this time in Middlesbrough, last year, which took in 270 children aged six to 11, from eight mainstream schools.

Again, the researchers saw "significant improvements", and because this trial was run with mainstream rather than learning-disabled children, the significance was potentially greater, with relevance to all school-age children.

"The results are now in and they have exceeded my expectations, especially in children who were already functioning well above their age. For example, an eight-year-old child who was already reading at an age 13 level, was reading at an age 17 level three months into the trial," reported lead researcher Dr Madeleine Portwood.

Mary Cobbold, head teacher of St Bernadette's School from which 30 children took part, is reported to have expressed delight at the "accelerated improvements" they saw.

"Marked improvements in handwriting have been seen, as well as increases in reading age that surpass what we would normally expect within three months," she said.

Picton is a great believer in the power of fatty acids, and points to nutrition guru Patrick Holford's estimate that as many as 80% of people in the West have fatty acid deficiencies.

“If you look at the Western lifestyle, we don’t eat the precursors of fatty acids. And the little bit we do eat is cancelled out by all the junk food we consume,” she says.
Nineteen years ago, before eye q, she turned to the diet and fatty acids approach in respect of her own son.
“I’d tried everything with my own hyperactive child, but when I found the answer he changed almost immediately. He was 14 and one week he was spelling mummy mumi, and the next week he could spell almost anything,” she recalls.
Picton estimates that between 3% and 10% of all South African children are affected by ADHD, and believes that the best results come from a combination of fatty acids and elimination of flavourants and colourants from the child’s diet.
“Increase the fatty acid levels, and take the rubbish out of their food,” is her suggestion.
Durban pharmacist Karen Norman says it makes sense that without our brain chemicals being in the correct ratio, we cannot hope to get the best out of our brains.
“We need to feed our brains correctly to get the best out of them, and we put a lot of rubbish into our bodies, with the problem compounded by the pollutants in the air we breathe every day,” she says.

The company however does not necessarily see their product as a substitute for Ritalin, but rather as something to be used in combination where necessary.

“Our research shows that about 45% of ADHD children responded well to eye q, and of course not every child is ADHD, so it’s an option that parents can either use with existing treatment, or try as “first-line” option, if they so choose.

“The results we hear about have been seen after quite short periods, but we recommend 12 weeks is the optimal timeframe needed to correct the fatty acid deficiency, and we’ve arrived at that through measurable criteria that have been part of the recent and ongoing studies,” she says.

Picton says that what she’s seen of eye q, she “likes very much”.
“The thing is that if you raise a child’s levels of functioning to optimal levels, a lot of the little difficulties will disappear.

“Sometimes the improvements are seen almost immediately and in other cases it takes a couple of weeks, but if you give fatty acids alone, without removing the rubbish from the diet, I believe the improvements take longer to manifest,” Picton says.
*eye q is available from all pharmacies and recommended health stores.

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