

Non-prescription interventions for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

What is attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder?

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, also known as ADHD, is a condition that runs in families. ADHD can affect behaviour so much that functioning on a daily basis becomes difficult.

Children and teens with ADHD:

- have trouble paying attention,
- have trouble finishing their work,
- are impulsive and may act without thinking,
- have trouble following directions,
- have trouble managing their emotions,
- struggle with transitions or changes, and
- are easily distracted.

While specific symptoms differ from child to child, ADHD can lead to problems in school, with relationships (friends, family members), and with self-esteem.

How can ADHD be treated?

With treatment, children with ADHD are better able to live with and manage their symptoms. Treating ADHD can include:

- education and skills training for parents, children and youth,
- strategies for understanding and building your child's social skills,

- classroom management strategies and study skills, and
- medication.

The most common medications used to treat ADHD are called stimulants. They are effective and can be used safely.

How do doctors make decisions about which therapies to recommend?

Doctors read and review scientific studies regularly. Studies published in medical journals have to meet certain standards before doctors use them to make decisions. Doctors also attend regular professional education seminars to learn more about treatments and how well they work.

Are there other ways to treat ADHD?

Ads in magazines, on the Internet or on television often promote other therapies that claim to treat ADHD. Some ads even claim that the product or treatment (non-prescription therapies) is safer or works better than medications prescribed by doctors.

The problem is that, in most cases, alternative therapies have not had the same kind of scientific review or testing as prescription medicine for ADHD. The studies of these therapies don't meet the same standards, so there is no guarantee that they are safer than or work as well as medications.

Scientific evidence on alternative therapies suggests that parents should be careful and well informed before they try such treatments. Many can cause side effects, and some can be dangerous. **Talk with your doctor before trying any alternative approaches for your child's ADHD.**

What *do* we know about other interventions for ADHD?

Here's what we know about alternatives to medications.

Interventions that may be helpful:

- **Healthy diet:** Children need regular meals and a balanced diet. This provides good nutrition without any special supplements needed. Skipping meals, especially breakfast, can affect attention. Start your child's day with a healthy breakfast.

- **Exercise:** Exercise improves attention and mood. Children with ADHD benefit from movement breaks at school and from consistent daily exercise.
- **Sleep:** Poor quality sleep or not enough sleep can affect attention and cause irritability and moodiness. Review your child's sleep habits with your doctor to optimize sleep.
- **Less screen time:** Avoid using screens for at least 1 hour before bedtime and keep all screens out of your child's bedroom. They interfere with sleep, and poor sleep affects attention.

Interventions with no evidence to show they help:

- **Special diets** may help a small group of children who have allergies, food sensitivities or who suffer from migraine headaches. However, there is little evidence that a diet without sugar or additives helps attention. If you want to try changing your child's diet, discuss it with your doctor to make sure it's the right choice. Your doctor will also monitor to see if the new diet is working.
- **Vitamin supplements:** Most children eating a healthy balanced North American diet – including children with ADHD – will not need any vitamin or mineral supplements. However, some children with very limited food choices may develop low levels of certain nutrients, especially iron. Talk to your doctor. They will take a diet history and may do blood testing before deciding if any supplements are right for your child.
- **Herbs** can be calming, but none have been proven to help with the main symptoms of ADHD. Because herbal products are not regulated, manufacturers don't have to follow specific rules about product safety. Ask your pharmacist about purity (how strong it is), safety, and toxicity (whether it can cause harm).
- **Biofeedback** claims to help people control their own responses. It involves a big commitment from the whole family and is very expensive. Despite over 20 years of research (usually involving very small groups of children), results are still not clear. It is still considered an experimental treatment.

Other treatments with no proof they work for ADHD symptoms:

- Antioxidants
- Chiropractic therapy
- Hypnotherapy/hypnosis

- Homeopathy (combinations of plant, animal or mineral extracts as remedies)
- Vision therapy, oculo-vestibular treatment, sound training

Some of these unproven therapies are expensive and possibly harmful. Your time and money are better spent on supporting your child in ways proven to be helpful.

Additional resources

- Canadian Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Resource Alliance
(<http://www.caddra.ca/>)
- Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada (CADDAC)
(<http://caddac.ca/adhd/#>)
- Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
(<http://www.ldac-acta.ca/>)
- Natural and Non-prescription Health Products Directorate (Health Canada)
(<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/natural-non-prescription.html>)

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- Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Committee

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