

Alternative treatments 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, they 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,
- strategies for understanding and building your child social skills,
- special programs to help your child in school, and
- medication.

The most common medications used to treat ADHD are called stimulants.

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.

What about alternative therapies?

You may have seen ads in magazines, on the Internet or on television about alternative therapies that claim to treat ADHD. Some ads even claim that the product or treatment advertised 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 the medications normally used to treat ADHD. The studies of alternative therapies don't meet the same standards, so there is no guarantee that these therapies are safer or work as well as than 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 to your doctor before trying any alternative therapy for your child's ADHD.**

What do we know about alternative therapies?

Here's what we know about the therapies that have been promoted as alternatives to medications.

Therapies that may be helpful:

- **Essential fatty acids**, such as fish oil or primrose oil may have some benefit for children with ADHD, but there is still a lot of research to be done.

Experimental therapies:

- **Biofeedback** claims to help people control their own responses. It involves a big commitment from the whole family and is very expensive. Studies on whether biofeedback works have been done using very small groups of children and results are not clear. It is still considered to be an experimental treatment.

Therapies with no evidence to show they help:

- **Changes in diet** 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 help with the symptoms of ADHD. Children need a balanced diet with food from all four food groups—vegetables and fruit, grain products, milk and alternatives, and meat and alternatives. 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 watch to see if the new diet is working.
- **Vitamin supplements:** There is no scientific evidence that vitamin supplements help to treat ADHD. However, if your child is lacking a certain vitamin or mineral (such as iron, magnesium or zinc), a supplement may be needed. Talk to your doctor. She may do blood testing before recommending which vitamins supplements that are right for your child.
- **Herbs** can be calming, and some studies show they may play a role in memory and thinking, 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 its purity (how strong it is), safety, and toxicity (whether it can cause harm).
 - Valerian, sometimes used to help with sleep problems and anxiety, can cause headaches.
 - Blue-green algae can cause stomach upset, weakness, numbness and tingling.
 - Ginkgo biloba is said to help brain function but can also cause headaches, dizziness, palpitations, stomach upset and skin rashes. Do not use ginkgo biloba for children with a blood clotting problem.
- **Antioxidants**, also known as anti-aging remedies, help protect nerve cells. But they have no proven direct effect on ADHD symptoms.
 - There is no evidence that pycnogenol works, and it should not be used in children diagnosed with a blood disorder.
 - Melatonin may help with sleep problems but can also cause headaches, fatigue, irritability and sleepiness. It has been known to trigger convulsions (seizures) and possibly delay puberty.
- **Hypnotherapy** might help with some common ADHD symptoms.
- **Homeopathy** uses combinations of plant, animal or mineral extracts as remedies. No studies have shown that homeopathy works in treating ADHD.
- **Vision therapy**, oculovestibular treatment, sound training: There is no evidence to show that any of these treatments works in treating ADHD.

More information from the CPS:

- Natural health products and children
- A parent's guide to health information on the Internet
- Extended-release medications for children and adolescents with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (position statement)

For more information about ADHD:

- Canadian Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Resource Alliance
- Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
- Learning Disabilities Association of Quebec

For more information about alternative therapies:

- Health Canada's Office of Natural Health Products

Reviewed by the following CPS committees:

- Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Committee

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The information on Caring for Kids should not be used as a substitute for medical care and advice. If you have specific concerns about your child's health, please see your child's paediatrician, family physician, or another health care provider.

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