

# treating ADHD naturally



If you are looking for natural approaches to help your child focus and perform better in school, you are not alone. ADHD is one of the most commonly diagnosed and costly mental health or behavioral problems in America; it is also very common for families facing it to seek natural therapies. Between 3% and 10% (depending on age and gender) of school age children are diagnosed with ADHD. The drugs used to treat it are in the top five for American children (the other two include an allergy medicine and an asthma medicine). Even eminent organizations such as the British National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence do not recommend medications as the first line treatment for most people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

## Re-frame the label

While it's certainly possible to fixate on diagnostic labels and focus on the negative behaviors associated with ADHD, you may find it more helpful to focus on their strengths. For example, high activity may be viewed as energetic, enthusiastic, exuberant or filled with vitality. Someone who is inattentive to others, or "off in her own world", may be very creative or innovative. Someone who is impulsive could be viewed as spontaneous, flexible or adaptable. Although it can be challenging in a crowded classroom, being energetic, aware of subtle changes in the environment, and innovative may be useful for someone hunting wild game or an artist. The exuberant, creative qualities that can wreak havoc in a chemistry lab can make for great salesmen.

## Making a diagnosis

There are no blood tests, microbiology cultures or X-rays to confirm the diagnosis. However, medical tests can help detect other problems that can con-

*Harrison's teacher had asked his family to have him evaluated for ADHD. His mom, Megan, thought he was just a rambunctious boy whose behavior deteriorated after eating candy.*

*Megan had read on the Internet that ADHD stimulant medications could interfere with his appetite, so she asked her pediatrician about natural approaches to help him behave better in school.*



tribute to distractibility, such as anemia or visual problems.

### **ADHD and other challenges**

About half of children diagnosed with ADHD also have learning problems, memory problems, sleep problems, problems with mood or anxiety, or feel angry, resentful and oppositional. It is frustrating to be told frequently that your behavior is bad or you are bad. ADHD also increases the risk of injuries and developing addictions.

The good news is that regardless of the diagnoses, there are many strategies that can help improve concentration, focus and deliberateness. Optimal therapies can improve current behaviors and long-term prognosis.

Harrison's mom was asked to remember three things:

1. Harrison's behaviors are not character flaws; they reflect differences in brain function, not willful disobedience.

2. Improvement is possible for people like Harrison.

3. Medical problems can interfere with the ability to pay attention. For example, thyroid problems can masquerade as an attention problem. We needed to check his hearing, vision, do a complete physical exam and a couple of blood tests to make sure we didn't miss something that could be easily corrected for Harrison.

Here is a checklist of natural approaches that can help.

**1. Exercise.** At least 30 – 60 minutes of aerobic activity is important. Frequent breaks (at least once an hour) to stretch and move can help children stay focused during long school days.

**2. Sleep.** Adequate sleep is important for being able to focus, pay attention and control impulsive behavior. Poor sleep reduces attention, increases fidgeting, impairs judgment and performance and leads to more mistakes, accidents and injuries. The three main approaches to improving sleep are to improve a) daytime activities, b) the sleeping environment and c) a sleep routine.

**a) Daytime activities:** Exercise vigorously early in the day; save more gentle

exercise such as stretching, yoga or tai chi for the evening. Use bright lights early and dimmer lighting later in the evening.

**b) Sleeping environment:** Cool, dark room with warm, comfy bedding ~ Silence or soft, soothing music or nature sounds; not dance music ~ Sedating fragrances such as lavender, roses, or chamomile ~ Free the bedroom from TV! Avoid exposure to upsetting, distracting, violent or scary stories within 2 hours of bedtime.

**c) Sleeping routines:** Head to bed at the same time daily ~ Take a warm bath or shower before bed ~ Eat a light snack containing a protein and a complex carbohydrate within 2 hours before bed ~ Reduce stress. Read something soothing, reassuring or inspiring. Give a back rub or massage ~ Accent appreciation. Count your blessings.

**3. Nutrition.** The brain requires a steady supply of optimal fuel to maintain concentration and deliberation. As Michael Pollan advises, "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants."

• Eat a healthy breakfast to start the day with the fuel it needs.

• Do not skip meals. Consider snacking on complex carbs or protein to keep blood sugar steady.

• You do not need to ban sugar from the kitchen. At least 12 studies have shown that sugar is not the culprit in ADHD; however, many foods that contain sugar (or nowadays, high fructose corn syrup) also contain artificial colors, flavors and preservatives that CAN contribute to ADHD.

• Avoid artificial flavors, colors, sweeteners, preservatives and other chemical additives.

• The Feingold diet is controversial. It avoids synthetic colors and flavors, the preservatives BHA, BHT and TBHQ and artificial sweeteners such as aspartame. During the initial weeks of the program, foods and medicines containing salicylates (such as aspirin, apples, almonds,

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and grapes) are also avoided and re-introduced as tolerated. The part about salicylates is particularly controversial, but many parents find that their children do better when they do not eat foods containing artificial flavors, colors and sweeteners.

*Megan enrolled Harrison in a Tae Kwon Do Class. She also started shopping for organic, locally grown products, freeing her family from the effects of pesticides, artificial flavors, sweeteners and preservatives while supporting local farmers. She decided that the whole family could do with a better breakfast routine, and it would be fun to try some new recipes. She packed healthy snacks for Harrison, such as string cheese and soy nuts so he'd have a steady supply of amino acids throughout the school day. She also got him a stainless steel thermos so he could carry his own water without worrying about the BPA in plastic.*

- Drink plenty of filtered water to avoid dehydration. Dehydration contributes to confusion, irritability and impaired concentration and school performance. Eating whole foods and drinking pure water are the most fundamental part of good nutrition. For those who do not eat perfectly (most of us) and those who have unique needs for additional elements (due to genetics, other medical conditions or medications), multivitamin/mineral supplements or supplements with specific essential nutrients can help improve attention and focus. There is variability in the need for and quality of supplements, and excesses can be toxic. Please seek guidance from a nutritionally oriented licensed clinician before embarking on long-

term supplementation.

- B vitamins are particularly important for proper brain function; supplements have proven helpful in several studies of people with ADHD symptoms.
- Avoid deficiencies of iron, zinc, calcium or magnesium. Deficiencies can contribute to learning and behavior problems. Magnesium supplements have been used successfully alone and in combination with vitamin B6 to improve behavior in children with ADHD. Several studies have also shown benefits from zinc supplements for children with ADHD.
- Fish is brain food. Omega-3 essential fatty acids found in fish are essential for proper brain development. Low levels are linked to ADHD and behavioral problems. If your child does not eat sardines, salmon or mackerel twice weekly, consider a supplement containing between 500 and 2000 milligrams of omega-3 fatty acids. Studies have shown that supplementation with fish oils can alleviate ADHD symptoms and improve academic achievement.
- Many amino acids are the building blocks the brain needs to make chemical messengers necessary for optimal attention. For example, studies suggest that carnitine or s-adenosylmethionine (SAM or SAM-E) can improve ADHD symptoms.
- Melatonin supplements may help those with ADHD fall asleep more easily at bed time. Daytime doses of melatonin do not improve hyperactive behavior.

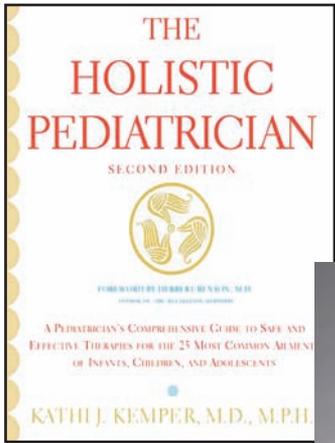
**4. Environment.** Make it positive while reducing toxic influences.

- Natural daylight in schools can improve attendance and academic performance while lowering energy costs.
- Everyone knows it's easier to memorize the ABCs when you learn them with a song. Rhythm and pitch help enhance learning and recall; the regular rhythms and sound structure of classical baroque music is especially helpful in promoting attention and logical thinking. Music can also be used as a behavioral strategy to reward desired behavior. Music can improve attention and motivation, communication skills and social interactions. Turn down the volume to avoid damage to the ear.
- Spend more time in nature. More time in green outdoor settings can reduce symptoms of hyperactivity and attention deficits and improve self-discipline.
- Clean up the clutter. Good, clean designs can help improve concentration and clarity. Create a calendar and daily chart of activities to help improve predictability and organizational skills.

*Megan started taking Harrison to the park twice a week to run and play. She and her husband asked her sister to help them organize the house and donate things they no longer needed to a local charity. She posted a calendar and daily schedule in the kitchen so everyone could anticipate daily events. She started playing music for 5 minutes for Harrison for every 10 minutes he concentrated on his homework. Everyone in the family felt more organized and homework time became more enjoyable.*

- Avoid exposure to brain toxins such as tobacco smoke, alcohol and illicit drugs; even prescription pain killers can

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cloud thinking and impair concentration. Up to 270,000 cases of ADHD per year could be prevented in the US if mothers did not smoke during pregnancy.

- Avoid exposure to environmental chemicals such as PCBs, PBBs and PBDEs; they can interfere with thyroid function essential for normal brain development and function. Advocate for their elimination from the environment.

- Avoid exposure to persistent organic pollutants (POPs) such as dioxin (a by-product of the process used to bleach paper products) Don't use pesticides such as dieldrin, which increase the rate of learning disabilities and ADHD. Use "green" clean products and pest control practices.

- Turn off the television and minimize use of electronic games to less than one hour daily. Instead, spend your time reading, learning, walking or other activities, interactive family games or hobbies, or social activities or clubs.

*Since they had already started spending more time in the park and more time listening to music, it was easier to spend less time in front of the TV. Megan suggested they start having family game night once a week so they could enjoy one another's company and help build Harrison's social skills and strategic thinking. Harrison's dad decided that improving his son's behavior was another incentive for him to quit smoking, and he made an appointment with his clinician to talk about strategies to free himself from his addiction to nicotine.*

**5. Stress.** Learn to manage stress and use effective behavioral strategies to promote patience and attention. Stress interferes with concentration. Struggling with attention problems is stressful for the individual and the whole family; stress management is an important skill for teachers, clinicians, parents and siblings, too.

- Focus on the positive and reframe things in a positive light. Reframe stumbling blocks as stepping stones:

#### STUMBLING BLOCK

What's wrong?  
What caused it?  
Who is to blame?  
What if it fails?  
Will I fail?  
I'm a failure.

#### STEPPING STONE

What do you want?  
How can we fix it?  
What can we do about it?  
How will we celebrate mastery?  
What will it take to succeed?  
I've identified areas of strength and challenge areas to improve.

- Manage mistakes constructively. **DO:** Recognize the mistake; Recognize a learning opportunity; Remember that all human beings have needs, values and goals; Reflect on your resources; Pick one small, concrete, measurable achievable behavior to improve; Plan to celebrate your successes. **DON'T:** Ignore or cover up an error; Engage in name-calling (idiot, moron, loser, terrible person, etc.) or fault finding; Tell yourself what you "should" have done; Dwell on deficiencies; Be overly ambitious or vague; Take success for granted.

- Structure and routine. Make routines as predictable, clear and consistent as possible. Consider making wall charts with

schedules and calendars. Make bed times, meal times, tooth brushing, bath time, and other events routine. This allows flexibility in other areas without chaos overwhelming the day.

- Set the stage. Seat someone whose mind wanders closer to the teacher to minimize distractions. Keep the boisterous person near the coach to discourage sudden outbursts and allow for easier, less humiliating corrections. Seat him/her next to a good peer role model to reduce off task behavior and improve productivity.

- Break big jobs into smaller tasks. Give or show specific directions for each task. Praise progress for each task. Expect that not every task will be completed perfectly. Encourage continued efforts. Praise persistence and honest efforts.

- Practice patience and delayed gratification. Ask your child to play the patience game. For example, when your child asks you a question that doesn't require an immediate answer, ask them if they'd like to have 1 sticker (or other suitable reward) now (with the answer) or 2 stickers if he waits 5 minutes for the answer? If he can't wait 5 minutes, start with 1 minute and work your way up. You can also play in your imagination – would you rather have a million dollars today or \$10 million in 3 years? Talk about the benefits of waiting and thinking things through before answering, and strategies you've found helpful in thinking things through rather than reacting impulsively.

- Provide breaks and encourage physical activity during these breaks. This gets the blood flowing to the brain.

- Encourage learning and working activities that include physical action. Clap hands or click fingers while spelling. Do jumping jacks while reciting multiplication facts. Play bean-bag toss games while playing question and answer games in

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social studies. Make science experiments as interactive and engaging as possible; don't just read what other people have done. Give the child a hard rubber ball to squeeze silently in class; there are often times the child needs to sit still, but the hands need something to do, so give him or her something small and safe to work with.

- Catch your child being good. Frequently praise desired behavior. "You sat still for 30 seconds, that's great. You made it another 2 minutes, I'm proud of you." Try to give at least five compliments for every correction. Recognize strengths and praise them. Praise enthusiasm and exuberance and find constructive outlets for those gifts.

- Design discipline with success in mind. Set clear, specific, measurable expectations and provide consistent, timely, fair, sensible consequences for behavior (for yourself and your children). Spanking and blaming are generally ineffective in the long-term. Remain calm when offering a correction or consequence. If you are overwhelmed with anger, frustration or sadness, take time to cool off before considering consequences. Role model the behavior you desire to see in others. Plan rewards and follow through on celebrations for success.

- Seek support from others. Seek insight and support from other parents, teachers, coaches, physicians, psychologists, pastors and others who work with people facing challenges with attention, focus and self discipline. Talk with your colleagues or your child's teacher or coach regularly to share strategies about what works. Network with others who are facing attention and activity differences.

- Use your resources. Policies and laws protect children, adolescents and adults with disabilities. Be aware of national, regional and local laws that offer protection and additional resources. If you need more information, ask your local experienced teacher or clinician for advice and direction.

- Participate in extra-curricular clubs, sports and community organizations. Participation in organized activities provides social support and models organizational skills. It helps reduce temptations to get into trouble and promotes pro-social behavior.

**6. Additional help.** While you optimize a healthy lifestyle to promote attention, self-discipline and focus, consider professional counseling or coaching. Psychologists, social workers, teachers, school counselors, pediatricians and family physicians are trained to help provide coaching and behavioral advice for families facing ADHD. Behavioral therapies, guided by professionals, take a little longer to show a benefit than

medications do. However, the benefits of medications end when you stop taking the medication, while the benefits of behavioral coaching last for many months and even years after the initial therapy.

*With so much to do, Megan felt a little overwhelmed. She made an appointment with our office psychologist to make a plan to help organize their lives, manage Harrison's behavior and set up reasonable schedules, consequences and rewards. After 6 weeks of weekly meetings, Megan had a whole new insight into more effective ways to help manage her own stress and help Harrison manage his, too.*

**7. Herbal remedies.** Research about herbal remedies is ongoing. Check with your clinician for information about the latest studies from reputable scientists, not just the latest hype.

- Calming herbs such as chamomile, hops, kava kava, lavender, lemon balm, passion flower, and valerian may help promote sleep or reduce agitation, but they are not usually helpful for calming hyperactive, inattentive or impulsive behavior during the day.

- A combination of ginseng and ginkgo (AD-FX®) has benefited children with ADHD and dyslexia.

- Green tea contains some caffeine as well as theanine, which can be calming. Don't drink it after 5 PM to avoid insomnia from the caffeine content.

- Pycnogenol or pine bark extract was significantly better than placebo pills in improving attention and concentration and decreasing hyperactivity in children in several European studies. Products vary in quality. Check with a licensed health professional to learn more.

- St. Johns wort has not proven useful in improving symptoms of ADHD.

**8. School interventions.** Be sure that your child or teen is receiving all the school services to which he or she is entitled. Help teachers and school administrators recognize your child's unique gifts and challenges. Section 504 of the U.S. federal Vocational Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination against any person with a disability; under Section 504, students may receive services such as a smaller class size, tutoring, modification of homework assignments, help with organizing, and other assistance. A 1999 addendum from the US Department of Education to the Individuals with Disability



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Act (IDEA) provides that children whose disabilities adversely affect their educational performance should receive special services that address the ADHD and its effects.

Check with your health care professional and your school to learn about the latest policies and regulations. At the very least, schedule regular meetings with your child's teacher to monitor progress, advocate for seating arrangements that put the child near the front of the classroom. Urge schools to include daily recesses, music and physical activity throughout the day. Support teachers and administrators who offer creative, effective strategies to promote your child's strengths.

Work with your local community to promote healthier lunch options (avoiding artificial colors, sweeteners and flavoring agents) and decrease the promulgation of unhealthy foods and beverages in school vending machines.

**9. Biofeedback.** EEG biofeedback (also known as neurofeedback) can affect brain activity and significantly improve behavior, attention and IQ scores. A few studies have begun to compare the effects of neurofeedback with other therapies for ADHD; neurofeedback has proven as effective as more standard approaches. To achieve sustained changes in brain function multiple visits or treatment sessions (20 – 50 in most studies that showed a benefit) are required; these sessions may not be covered by insurance.

A novel form of biofeedback for hyperactive children is providing feedback about activity levels. Devices about the size of a wristwatch can keep count of movements, and provide feedback about activity. Providing positive verbal feedback (Good job! Great work!) when a child attains the desired level of activity combined with this biofeedback technique has resulted in startling improvements in behavior. As with neurofeedback, this therapy may not be covered by your insurance, but fewer sessions (less than 6) are required for training.

**10. Massage.** Massage can promote relaxed attention, lower stress, and improve performance on standard tests. Studies support using massage therapy to help people diagnosed with ADHD. Students who received regular massage (twice weekly for one month) had improved moods and classroom behavior compared with similar students who did not get massage. Teens with ADHD who received massage therapy were less fidgety, less hyperactive and more attentive than teens trained in relaxation techniques. Training a trusted family member or close friend to provide simple massage treatments could make this a reasonable option for more people.

**11. Homeopathy.** Long-term follow up by a homeopathic practitioner can help some people with ADHD. However, rigorous randomized controlled trials have not found that homeopathic remedies alone are more effective than placebo pills for ADHD. My reading of these studies is that the understanding and support of the homeopath is more important than the remedies themselves. Homeopathy is safe; insurance coverage varies.

## SUMMARY

1. See your health professional to check for physical factors that can interfere with learning, concentration and deliberation such as eye and ear problems, anemia, allergies and hypothyroidism.

2. Exercise – at least 60 minutes daily (perhaps one 45 minute intense stretch with 3 five-minute activity breaks during the day).

3. Sleep - 7 1/2- 9 hours for adults and more for growing children. Use healthy routines and optimize the sleeping environment. Consider using calming herbs to help promote sleep.

4. Nutrition – eat breakfast; consider snacks including protein and whole grains, whole fruits and vegetables to keep blood sugar stable. Minimize use of processed foods. Avoid artificial colors, flavors, preservatives and pesticides. Avoid dehydration; drink water, not soda. If you suspect that certain foods impair thinking or concentration, keep a food diary or try going for two weeks without that food and track what happens. Make sure your salt is iodized. Eat fish rich in omega-3 fatty acids (sardines, salmon or mackerel) at least twice weekly. Consider consulting with a nutritionally focused clinician to plan any major changes in your diet.

5. Nutritional supplements – take a multivitamin/multimineral to avoid deficiencies of B vitamins, iron, magnesium and zinc. Consider taking an omega-3 fatty acid supplement such as fish oil or cod liver oil. Talk with your health professional about a supplement trial of carnitine or s-adenosylmethionine; also discuss short trials of herbal remedies such as ginseng, ginkgo or pine bark extract. Consider melatonin as a short-term sleep aid, particularly for those who tend to fall asleep later and later and wake up later and later or during travel across several time zones.

6. Make sure the environment is brightly lit during the day; spend time in nature; use music mindfully as a reward, incentive, or to help organize tasks or improve memorization;



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reduce clutter; organize schedules clearly (calendars, clocks, charts posting chores and activities); foster predictability and make back-up plans routine.

7. Reduce environmental brain toxins such as tobacco smoke, alcohol and illicit drugs. If you have well water, have it tested for heavy metals. Reduce exposure to lead, arsenic and manganese. Advocate for elimination of PCBs, PBBs and PBDEs in the environment. Don't use dieldrin or atrazine pesticides and ask your school and workplace not to use them. Minimize exposure to formaldehyde, persistent organic pollutants, bisphenol A. Turn off the television.

8. Learn and practice effective stress management techniques and positive behavioral strategies. Learn to reframe negative experiences (turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones). If you need help getting started or improving your practice, see a qualified professional such as a psychologist, social worker, physician or licensed counselor.

9. Catch your child being good; let your compliments outnumber criticisms by 5 to 1. Manage mistakes constructively. Set clear, specific measurable expectations and provide consistent, fair, timely and sensible consequences for behavior. Again, a physician, psychologist or licensed counselor can be very helpful in getting started.

10. Seek support from others. Find parent support groups, teachers, counselors, pastors and health professionals. Attend groups, clubs, teams, church or temple, and organized events. It takes a village. For ADHD, it takes an even bigger village!

11. Use resources. Advocate for your family member to receive legally mandated evaluations and services. Meet regularly with colleagues, teachers and/or counselors for a

strength-focused, mastery-oriented team approach to achieving success.

12. Talk with your health professional and insurance company about referrals for biofeedback and massage services.

*Megan successfully engaged several other parents to attend school board meetings to get unhealthy snacks and beverages out of school vending machines. She also worked with Harrison's teachers to schedule more recess and more time for physical activity during class. She sought professional coaching to help her manage Harrison's behavior more effectively and positively. Within a year, she felt more empowered and more capable as a parent, and Harrison's third grade teacher never even raised the possibility of him needing medications for ADHD.*

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*Dr. Kemper is recognized internationally as the leading authority on complementary therapies for children. She had the honor of being a finalist for the Bravewell Leadership Award in Integrative Medicine in 2003 and 2005. For more information, visit [www1.wfubmc.edu/phim](http://www1.wfubmc.edu/phim) or call 336-716-9640.*

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