

Patient information from BMJ

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ADHD in children: what treatments work?

Caring for a child who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can put a strain on you and your family. If your child has been diagnosed with ADHD there are treatments that can help with your child's behaviour so that he or she can learn and develop positively.

The two main treatments for ADHD are medicines and a talking treatment (psychotherapy) called behaviour therapy. These treatments are often used together.

You can use our information to talk with your doctor and decide which treatments are right for your child.

Psychoeducation - learning about ADHD

The first thing your doctor or therapist should do is to make sure you have as much useful information as possible about ADHD. You might hear your doctor refer to this as psychoeducation.

Your doctor should talk with you about the condition and what treatments are available, as well as what help might be available in schools.

He or she might be able to put you in touch with other agencies that can offer help, such as support groups, national associations, and charities.

Medicines

Many children with ADHD, especially those with severe symptoms, take medicines to help control those symptoms.

Many parents are anxious about long-term medicines being prescribed for their children. Taking long-term medication is a big step and you need to be as sure as possible that it's right for your child.

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You can use the information here to talk with your doctor so you can make a decision together.

Stimulants

The most common drug treatment for ADHD is medicine to stimulate the nerves in the brain. It may seem strange to treat hyperactivity with stimulants, but stimulants have been used for many years to treat ADHD.

These medicines should make your child less restless, less impulsive, and more able to concentrate.

If your child takes a stimulant medicine he or she will begin with a low dose. Your doctor can then increase the dose little by little if needed. This approach is intended to control your child's symptoms as well as possible with the least risk of causing any side effects.

Some stimulants come as long-acting tablets. This means that children don't have to take as many tablets in one day. So, for example, it might mean that they don't have to take a tablet while at school.

There are several types or 'classes' of stimulant. So if one type doesn't work for your child, or if it causes side effects, you might be able to try another.

Stimulants cause side effects in many children who take them. These side effects often disappear after a couple of weeks. But if they don't disappear, doctors can prescribe a lower dose.

Common side effects of stimulant drugs are:

- reduced appetite and losing weight
- tics
- finding it harder to fall asleep.

A small number of children get more serious side effects, such as depression, worrying, and feeling irritable.

Some doctors and parents worry that stimulants might stop children growing properly.

We don't know for sure whether this happens, because the results of research aren't clear. But your doctor should regularly check your child's height and weight, usually every six months.

Other issues around stimulants

You might have heard that stimulants could be misused and taken recreationally. But the stimulants used for ADHD do not provide the 'high' sought by people who abuse drugs.

Some parents might also worry that taking stimulants will make their child more likely to become dependent on drugs or alcohol when the child is older. But there's no evidence that this is likely to happen.

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In addition, there have been some concerns that stimulants might increase the risk of sudden death or strokes in children and adults, especially those with heart defects. Doctors are therefore advised not to prescribe stimulant drugs to anyone with heart problems or high blood pressure.

Other medicines for ADHD

There are several other types of medicine used to treat ADHD. Your doctor might recommend these if stimulants haven't worked well enough, or if stimulants are not suitable for your child.

Atomoxetine is a type of drug called a noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor. Research suggests that it probably doesn't work as well as stimulants to reduce ADHD symptoms. But it might be a useful treatment for some children who can't take stimulants.

Your child can take it as a single daily dose or as two doses.

Atomoxetine can cause side effects in some people. Common ones include having less appetite and losing weight, feeling sick, feeling tired, and getting indigestion.

Your doctor should monitor your child's height and weight to make sure that atomoxetine isn't stopping your child growing properly.

A few people taking it have had serious liver damage, but this is very rare. But if your child becomes ill while taking atomoxetine you should see your doctor right away.

It's also possible that children taking atomoxetine might be more likely to think about killing themselves. This is very rare. But you should watch out for signs of depression or suicidal thoughts if your child takes this medicine.

Like stimulants, atomoxetine is not suitable for people with heart problems.

Alpha-2-adrenergic agonists seem to be more useful for reducing hyperactivity than for reducing inattention.

They are sometimes used alongside stimulants as they can help reduce symptoms such as sleep problems and tics that can be caused by stimulants.

Like other drugs used to treat ADHD, alpha-2-adrenergic agonists can affect blood pressure. So if your child takes any of these medicines your doctor will want to check his or her blood pressure regularly and might adjust the dose if your child's blood pressure seems a little high.

Other side effects can include tiredness, dizziness, and a dry mouth.

Antidepressant medicines might help reduce ADHD symptoms in some children who don't improve with other drugs. Antidepressants are not usually prescribed for children as some of these drugs have been found to cause suicidal thoughts in a small number of children.

If your doctor suggests antidepressants for your child to treat ADHD, he or she should explain why and should discuss the risks with you.

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Behaviour therapy

The main non-drug treatment for ADHD is a talking treatment (psychotherapy) called **behaviour therapy**.

Behaviour therapy might help you and your child cope better with ADHD. For example, some research has found that it can help some school-age children focus better on homework.

Behaviour therapy can be used as a treatment by itself. But it seems to work best when used alongside treatment with stimulant medicines.

In behaviour therapy a trained therapist counsels and supports your child and family and helps you learn to manage behaviour issues linked to ADHD.

The term behaviour therapy covers a wide range of treatments. They are based on the idea that all behaviour is learned and can be unlearned. Some treatments involve working with a therapist one to one. Others involve group activities. Your child's teacher may also be involved in the therapy.

Behaviour therapy usually involves a system of rewards to reinforce and help children understand positive behaviour. The aim is to help children plan ahead and choose the right behaviour.

You may feel more supported and better able to cope if your child's treatment includes therapy as well as medicine. Therapy may also allow your child to manage his or her behaviour with a lower dose of medicine. This can reduce the chance of side effects.

Diet

There are several theories linking children's diet with ADHD. But these are not supported by good evidence.

For example, research has not found that changing children's diets reduces ADHD symptoms.

Some parents say that not giving their children sweets or sugary drinks helps, because they believe their children become hyperactive when they consume sugar. But, while avoiding too much sugar is a healthy choice for lots of good reasons, there is no convincing evidence that sugar or artificial sweeteners cause the symptoms of ADHD.

Getting help to cope with your child's behaviour

Many parents of children with ADHD advise other parents not to try to cope with their child's problems on their own. Getting help and treatment for your child can make all the difference.

Parent education programmes aim to help parents improve their relationship with their child. The idea is that this will help the child to be less disruptive.

Parent education programmes are usually done in a group. You learn about how best to talk to your child and understand your child's feelings. Some people find that these programmes help improve children's behaviour and help parents feel less stressed.

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Where to get more help

You might want to contact a self-help group for families affected by ADHD. For example, in the UK the National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service (ADDISS) provides advice and support to families coping with ADHD (addiss.co.uk).

Also in the UK, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), which advises the government on healthcare, has issued advice about how to treat ADHD. NICE recommends that children under 6 should not be offered drug treatments. Instead, the focus should be on parent education.

For older children, parent education and talking treatments are usually tried before medication. However, children with severe ADHD may have drug treatment straight away.

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