

Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Jan 28, 2025

ADHD in children: what treatments work?

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition. People with ADHD may struggle with staying focused, feeling restless, or making impulsive decisions.

Learning that you have ADHD might feel overwhelming at first. You might also feel relieved, as it might help explain certain behaviors or struggles you've experienced. There's no "cure" for ADHD, but there are different treatments and strategies that can help you manage it.

The main treatments for ADHD are psychoeducation, behavioral therapy, and medications. These treatments are often used together.

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

Non-medication treatment

Psychoeducation - learning about ADHD

The first step your doctor or specialist should take is to make sure you have access to accurate, evidence-based information about ADHD. This will help you better understand the condition and make informed decisions about your treatment. You might hear your doctor refer to this as **psychoeducation**.

Psychoeducation helps you better understand ADHD by giving clear, structured information about the condition, its symptoms, and ways to manage it. It builds awareness and equips you with the knowledge to handle the challenges ADHD may present.

Psychoeducation can be delivered in group sessions, one-on-one meetings with a doctor or specialist, or through written materials and online resources.

You can also read more about ADHD in our information titled: *ADHD: What is it?*

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Behavioral therapy

The main nonmedication treatment for ADHD is a type of behavioral therapy. Behavioral therapy helps you find ways to manage ADHD symptoms in your daily life. Most types of behavioral therapy are aimed at children, but some can also help adults with ADHD.

Below are some examples of different types of behavioural therapy and what they involve:

- **Parent training in behavior management (PTBM)** : PTBM teaches parents of children with ADHD to understand and manage their child's behavior better. It teaches skills such as clear communication, reinforcing good behaviors, using time-outs, setting up a reward system at home, and handling challenging behaviors. This training usually includes 10 weekly group sessions, focusing on practical ways to improve behavior.
- **Behavioral classroom interventions**: This approach involves training teachers being trained to better support children with ADHD in the classroom. The training includes setting up clear rules, using a point system to reward good behavior, and sending daily report cards to parents to communicate progress. This approach is also based on behavior modification techniques and can involve both teachers and parents working together. For more information, see our information titled: *ADHD in children: help at school and at home*.
- **Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)**: CBT may be helpful in older children and adults with ADHD. It involves talking with someone specially trained to help people with ADHD. They can teach you practical skills to improve focus, stay organized, and control impulsive behaviors. This might include strategies for problem-solving, self-control, active listening, and dealing with and expressing feelings.

Behavioral therapy can be used as a treatment by itself, or it can be used alongside medications.

Other nonmedication treatments and strategies

Except for behavioral therapy, there is no strong evidence that other nonmedication treatments help with ADHD.

A lot of research has been done to find out if changing your diet can help with your symptoms of ADHD. The evidence for this is uncertain but your doctor will probably offer you standard advice for eating healthily.

Treatments like mindfulness, yoga, neurofeedback, and chiropractic care have also not been shown to be effective.

Your doctor or specialist might give you some general advice and strategies on how to manage your ADHD symptoms. For more detail, see our information titled: *ADHD in adults: strategies for managing daily tasks* or *ADHD in children: help at school and at home*.

Medications

Many people with ADHD take medications to help control their symptoms. Your doctor might recommend medications if your symptoms are severe, or if behavioral therapy isn't helping.

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There are several types of medications that can help manage ADHD. We discuss the main ones below.

Stimulants

The most common medications for ADHD are called **stimulants**, which come as pills. These medications should help you feel less restless, less impulsive, and more able to concentrate.

If you take a stimulant medication, you will begin with a low dose. Your doctor can then increase the dose little by little if needed. This approach aims to control your symptoms as well as possible with the least risk of causing any side effects.

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

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

Common side effects of stimulant medications include:

- reduced appetite and losing weight
- stomach ache, nausea, diarrhoea and vomiting
- headaches
- changes in mood
- trouble sleeping.

Some stimulants may cause an increase in your heart rate and blood pressure. If you have a heart condition, your doctor might do some extra tests to check if a stimulant is suitable for you. If you have a heart condition and take a stimulant medication, your doctor will check your heart rate and blood pressure more regularly.

You might have heard that stimulants increase the risk of substance use problems. However, there's no evidence to support this, and some studies show that prescribed stimulants may actually lower this risk in people with ADHD.

Other medications for ADHD

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

Atomoxetine is a type of medication 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 people who can't take stimulants.

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

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Atomoxetine has been linked to a very small risk of thoughts about suicide. If you have suicidal thoughts while taking atomoxetine, it's important to speak with a doctor right away. They may switch you to a different medicine and provide support to help you feel better.

Like stimulants, atomoxetine may not be suitable for people with heart conditions.

Alpha-2-adrenergic agonists are also used to treat ADHD. They 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 that can be caused by stimulants.

Like other medications used to treat ADHD, alpha-2-adrenergic agonists can affect blood pressure. If you take these medications, your doctor will regularly check your blood pressure and may adjust the dose if your blood pressure is high.

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

Antidepressant or antipsychotic medications might help reduce ADHD symptoms in some people whose symptoms don't improve with other medications. However, there isn't much good evidence that they help with ADHD, and they can cause side effects. Because of this, they are usually prescribed only by a specialist. Antidepressants may be used in both adults and children ages 6 to 18, while antipsychotics are typically only used in adults.

If your specialist suggests these medications, they should explain why they will be beneficial for you. They should also discuss the risks with you.

Where to get more help

There are many charities and support groups for people with ADHD and their families. Your doctor may be able to help you find one in your area, or you could search online. These groups often have useful resources and services and can connect you with others who are going through a similar experience.

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