



LIFESTYLE TIPS FOR CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS WITH ADHD

Children and teenagers with ADHD have to deal with many challenges every day. There is not a cure for the condition, although the symptoms can be successfully treated by behaviour strategies and medication if indicated. A healthy life style will also give an extra opportunity to reach full potential.

Diet

Current advice is that there is no direct causal link between ADHD and food. However, evidence shows that eating well is essential for good health and optimal brain function so it is important that the children and teenagers with ADHD have a balanced diet. Unless otherwise indicated, daily meals should include:

- 🚩 **Proteins** - lean meat and poultry, fish, eggs, vegetarian alternatives and dairy products.
- 🚩 **Complex carbohydrates** - wholegrain bread, wholegrain pasta and brown rice.
- 🚩 **Unsaturated fats** - olive oil, avocado oil, vegetable oil, nuts and seeds.
- 🚩 **Omega-3 fatty acids** - cold-water fatty fish, nuts and seeds.
- 🚩 **Raw and cooked vegetables** - as wide a range as possible.
- 🚩 **Fruit.**
- 🚩 **Foods containing iron** - sardines, beef, beans, lentils, leafy green vegetables and fortified cereals.

Sugar intake (from foods such as sweets, cakes, biscuits, white bread and cereals) should be limited and the regular eating of junk and highly processed foods should also be avoided (www.change4life.co.uk).



Some parents/caregivers report a link between behaviour and certain foods including those containing additives and preservatives. If you think this may be the case, keep a written record for a few weeks to identify problems. Always seek medical advice if you are considering major changes to the diet .

Food routines are crucial if a child or teenager has ADHD, especially if they have a poor appetite as a side-effect of medication. Breakfast is always recommended and, if necessary, extra healthy snacks must be offered later in the day when the effect of medication has worn off.

Vitamin supplements should not be necessary if the child or teenager is having a varied diet, but may be helpful if there is selective behaviour around food or a persistently poor appetite. Speak to a pharmacist or GP for specific advice. There is no conclusive evidence to show that taking fish-oil supplements helps ADHD, although some parents report improvements in their child's concentration after taking these.



Drinks

Dehydration can affect concentration. The amount of fluid required depends on several factors including age, weather and levels of physical activity, but 6-8 glasses daily is a rough guide. Water is recommended instead of fizzy drinks, fruit juice or squash, which have a high sugar content. Teenagers should avoid alcohol and energy drinks, especially if they are taking medication.



Exercise

Physical activity increases the levels of certain brain chemicals (dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin) which help improve focus, attention, motivation and mood. Exercise also promotes brain growth and leads to better sleep.

Whenever possible children and teenagers with ADHD should exercise and have 'green-time' every day. Walking, cycling, playing in the park, gardening and any form of outdoor activity will boost physical and mental health and provide an outlet for high energy levels. Safety must be considered as impulsivity is a core symptom of ADHD and there may be little sense of danger. Children should always be supervised if necessary.



Sleep

Many children and teenagers with ADHD struggle to sleep. Lack of sleep can cause behaviours similar to those found in ADHD, and addressing sleep issues can result in major improvements in how a child or teenager functions during the day. The following tips increase the chance of getting adequate amounts of good quality sleep:

- 🚩 Have a **set bedtime** which is consistent, even during weekends and holidays.
- 🚩 Have a **set waking time** which is consistent even during weekends and holidays.
- 🚩 Keep **sleeping and waking times** consistent in different home settings.
- 🚩 Have a **calming bedtime routine**.
- 🚩 **Switch off** all **technology** at least one hour before bedtime.
- 🚩 **Do not** have **TV** or **electronic gadgets** (including phones) in the bedroom.
- 🚩 **Avoid drinks** containing **caffeine** in the evenings.
- 🚩 Keep room **temperature** at **16-20°C**.
- 🚩 Have the **bedroom** as **dark** as possible.
- 🚩 Make sure the child feels **safe** and **happy**.
- 🚩 Use **low level soothing music/white noise** if the child does not like silence or the household is noisy.





Relaxation

Children and teenagers with ADHD need relaxation time every day. Relaxation means not only doing what you enjoy but taking part in calming activities and enjoying nurture time with adults. Options of mindfulness and simple yoga, including deep breathing techniques (<https://copingskillsforkids.com>) may be helpful to include in bedtime routines.

Technology time-out

Today's children and teenagers are growing up in a digital age. Constant electronic stimulation from TV, computers, games consoles, tablets and smart phones can affect the ability to concentrate and compound existing problems. Research also shows that the light emitted from screens interferes with the body's natural sleep/wake cycle and the production of melatonin (the hormone concerned with sleep).

Children and teenagers with ADHD may be naturally drawn to the use of electronic gadgets but should have exposure time limited to no more than one hour a day, and all technology should be switched off at least one hour before bedtime.

Taking notes (parents/caregivers)

Writing things down and goal setting (lists/diaries/mind maps) can be an effective way of kickstarting positive changes. A healthy lifestyle is more likely to be successful if it involves all family members.

Finding help

See **ADHD: Further Information and Support**.