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Natural Help for ADHD

Getting to the root of behavioral problems, medication-free.
by Nancy Buono

There's a new epidemic in the U.S.— the ADHD epidemic. Use of ADHD medication has increased by 311 percent for 15 to 19 year olds over the past 15 years, while use among children ages 5 to 14 years has risen by 170 percent, according to research by the Journal of the American Medical Association. In 1970, 150,000 children were treated for ADHD. Today, the number stands between six and eight million— a full 12-18 percent of U.S. schoolchildren. In the past three years alone, spending on children's drugs for ADHD and depression has soared by 77 percent.

The United States uses 90 percent of the world's Ritalin supply. Consumers Union, publisher of Consumer Reports, claims stimulant drugs are being used to treat ADHD in millions of American youngsters who do not have the disorder.

Meanwhile, in rural areas and foreign countries including New Zealand, Hong Kong and Great Britain only four percent of all school-age children meet the diagnostic criteria for ADHD, says the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Is it possible that as Americans we are overmedicating our children? As you face the statistics, you may want to consider the use medication-free alternatives to treat behavioral problems.

Proper Diagnosis is Key

What is ADHD and do so many of our kids really have it? Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a label to diagnose children or adults with significant problems of inattention, hyperactivity and/or impulsivity. Kids can often blurt things out without thinking first, jump from one task to another or become disorganized and forgetful. But before labeling a child with ADHD, specialists look for all of the following key criteria in behavior:

- Problems that commence before age 7.
- Problems that last for at least six months.
- Problems occurring continuously in multiple settings (not just the classroom).
- Behaviors that create a real handicap in at least two areas of the child's life— home, school, play, social situations or community settings.

These criteria are extremely significant. Many other situations can cause ADHD-like symptoms, including a sudden change in the child's life (death, divorce, moving), seizures, middle ear infections, vision problems, spinal misalignment, underachievement, anxiety and depression. Make sure that your child meets all the criteria and is not medicated simply for being an active, impulsive tween or teen.

Understanding Medications

While medications can be effective and beneficial in some cases, the costs and risks remain high. Pharmacological treatments include stimulants (Ritalin, Concerta), amphetamines (Dexedrine, Adderall), and inhibitors (Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, Straterra). Some studies link Ritalin to drug dependency in later years. Inhibitors recently received black box warnings from the FDA, due to an increase in suicidal thinking. Specifically, the FDA warns that children should be closely monitored for agitation, irritability and suicidal thinking or tendencies. Other drug side effects include seizures, cardiac problems,

psychosis, aggression, hostility, anxiety and hallucinations. Most importantly, doctors agree that while medications minimize symptoms, they do not cure ADHD and are not for everyone.

How Lifestyle Contributes

When we were kids, playing outdoors was the norm. For the most part, we did not plant ourselves for hours in front of a TV or computer screen, get dropped at daycare for 12 hours, dine on fast food and go to bed late. Could these lifestyle changes influence ADHD behaviors?

A 2004 study published in *Pediatrics* found that the amount of time spent watching TV correlates with the chance of developing attention problems by age 7. TV and video games alter brain waves, creating more alpha waves and a light hypnotic state. One ADHD symptom is lack of focus and concentration. Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim suggests that television retards social skills, another ADHD symptom. And, some researchers warn that early childhood learning programs such as *Sesame Street* actually create "over-stimulation and frenetic behavior."

Every hour spent in front of a television or computer screen is spent indoors. We should have enough common sense to realize that outdoor activity is healthy. Just in case we don't, research actually exists on the power of outdoor play. What was once considered typical outdoor play time is now, according to the *American Journal of Public Health*, a treatment for ADHD. Being outside in natural settings for afterschool and weekend activities reduces attention deficit symptoms in children.

Does the frenetic schedule we maintain with our kids also influence their behavior? A hectic lifestyle does increase stress, which lowers dopamine levels in the brain, and kids with ADHD demonstrate lower dopamine levels. In addition, lack of sleep makes us irritable, unable to concentrate and more easily affected by stress. Overtired tweens and teens don't politely yawn and go to bed; instead, they become hyperactive, cranky and irritable, more ADHD symptoms.

Healthy Body, Healthy Mind

Increasing research supports natural alternatives in place of ADHD medications as effective and safe. Actually, 64 percent of families currently utilize some sort of nonprescription therapy.

The most basic natural therapy is diet. Cutting down on fast food represents a healthy choice for all family members. Sugar, salt, additives and hydrogenated fat are the leading components in fast food. Sugar, chocolate, colors/additives/flavors, eggs, milk, wheat and corn can produce symptoms mimicking ADHD. Just think of your kids on Halloween. Low sugar consumption is especially critical, because children with ADHD also display decreased levels of adrenal hormones to regulate low blood sugar. Their uncontrolled drop in blood sugar decreases brain activity, and they then unconsciously compensate by becoming physically hyperactive to force their exhausted adrenals into producing more hormones.

In 2005, researchers reported that when food colorings and preservatives were removed from children's diets, the ADHD symptoms of 1,800 3 year olds decreased, only to increase again when the additives were reintroduced. Evidence also supports food allergy testing for ADHD cases.

Food supplements can help, too. *Alternative Medicine Review* reported in August 2003 that food supplement treatment for ADHD is as effective as Ritalin. Several studies demonstrate that kids with ADHD are deficient in minerals, especially magnesium, zinc and iron. Zinc helps regulate fatty acids and neurotransmitters, including dopamine.

Because ADHD is related to brain activity, it only makes sense to feed the brain. The human brain is 60 percent fat. This does not imply eat more french fries, however. Protein and essential fatty acids are, in fact, essential. Children low in essential fatty acid levels display excessive thirst, frequent urination, dry skin/hair, as well as more temper tantrums and problems with behavior, learning, immune function and sleep. Cold water fish (salmon, tuna), eggs, flaxseed and nuts are smart dietary choices to spur brain activity. A healthy diet coupled with a good children's multivitamin supports kids' nutritional needs.

It Takes a Village

Remember your family's emotional needs. Take parenting classes and attend counseling sessions to better support your child. Learn behavioral interventions to create structure for your child— ADHD kids function better with clear instructions and rules. And read up on nonprescription solutions to curbing ADHD.

Research conducted at Penn State Hershey Medical Center in 2002 showed Bach Flower Essences and Rescue Remedy effective in managing the symptoms of ADHD. These natural remedies improve focus, concentration and self-esteem while alleviating stress, worry and anxiety without side effects or drug interactions. A multidisciplinary approach is key— medical, psychological, nutritional and complementary care. With this multi-pronged approach, we may find ourselves utilizing drugs for four percent or less of our kids, not 15 percent.

We all know it takes a village to raise a child. Develop your village. Locate specialists who will take the time to properly diagnose and treat your child as a complete human being— caring for your child's body, mind and spirit.

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