

What Else Can Families Do?

At Focus-MD we are always looking for ways to improve the lives of our ADHD patients and their families. Medication management is usually important but it takes more than medication alone to reach our goal of well-controlled ADHD for most of our patients. Here are some good suggestions to help get you started on the road from Frustration to Focus! Enjoy the journey!

FOCUS on NUTRITION

Poor nutrition is not the cause of ADHD and changing the diet will rarely result in sufficient symptom improvement. However, good nutrition is vital to everyone for learning, attention and brain health.

- Consider supplementation of **Omega 3 fatty acids** since these tend to be low in our American diet.
- Omega 3 FA are found in walnuts, flax seed, eggs from chickens fed a vegetarian diet, cold-water fish like salmon and tuna.
- If considering supplementation start with 500mg of Omega 3 for children 4 to 6 years old and 1000mg for those over 7. Some sources recommend as high as 2500mg (2.5g) for children and 5000mg (5g) for adults.
The ratio of EPA to DHA should be 1:1 or 3:1 depending on which expert you query. The down side? Supplements with fish oil can have fishy after taste. Also kids may resist having to take another pill.
- Make sure to eat breakfast, the most important meal of the day. Plan something quick for rushed mornings and work at having time around the table for a 'real' breakfast when schedules allow.
- Include a good source of **protein at breakfast and lunch and for an after school snack** to help stabilize blood sugar and sustain attention. This is especially important when starting on stimulants, which are likely to initially decrease appetite, especially at lunch.
- Good sources of protein include nuts, peanuts, milk, cheese, yogurt, eggs and meats.
- Elimination diets such as the Feingold Diet have not been shown to improve outcomes in ADHD patients. Still, we do have parents who notice trends in their children's eating habits and focus. Please feel free to discuss with your provider.
- Some studies have suggested that elimination of food additives like dyes and preservatives improved hyperactive symptoms in children. The jury is still out on this but we can work with you to decrease the processed foods in your diet. Eat '**closer to the Earth**'. This means less processed foods and more fresh fruits and vegetables and that can't be a bad thing for our health!

- Since stimulants frequently decrease appetite, *what* your child eats becomes even more important. Since most Americans eat more than needed we don't worry as much about the quantity of food as the quality. Healthy meals and snacks are essential and junk food should be limited while kids have appetite suppression. When it comes to fast food we'd rather see your child eat a chicken finger (which at least has protein) than a French fry!
- If appetite is affected by stimulants or if your child is a picky eater, please add a multivitamin daily. Vitamins and trace minerals are essential to good brain function and emotional well-being.
- We follow weight, height and body mass index (BMI) at every Focus-MD visit to ensure that your child is getting adequate nutrition. It is not uncommon for appetite to be lower but rarely does the lack of appetite caused by ADHD medication affect appropriate weight gain and almost never linear growth-height.
- Share your nutritional concerns with your provider. There are ways to minimize these side effects and we want to work with you. No parent wants to watch a child lose weight but remember weight loss is common in many chronic conditions that affect children and often occurs as we start stimulants for ADHD. Our goal is to ensure adequate nutrition!
- One last note—surprisingly to most parents, sugar doesn't make ADHD symptoms worse. Over 80 studies have confirmed this and at least one study has suggested that sugar improves concentration. We don't recommend treating ADHD with sugar though! Some parents will tell us that no matter what the studies say, sugar or other foods change their kid's behavior. **We think you are the expert on your child** so follow your intuition here.

FOCUS on SLEEP

Sleep problems do not cause ADHD, however no one pays attention well when they are tired! Problems with sleep are common in ADHD patients and longer acting stimulants *can* make sleep problems worse or better! Let's Focus on a good night's sleep!

SLEEP TIPS:

- Have a routine bedtime and wake time
- Eliminate afternoon caffeine intake
- Avoid screen time and high energy activities in the hour before bed
- Darken the room
- White noise can help—a fan works or check out sleepmate.com
- Listening to music or nature sounds might stimulate the brain of ADHD patients and keep them awake but some patients find that a quiet room keeps them awake!
- Older kids should **avoid taking cell phones/computers to bed**—new studies confirm that these devices disrupt sleep.
- Avoid pets in the bedroom

- For some soothing smells (aromatherapy) such as lavender can promote sleep. Folk remedies like warm milk or herbal chamomile tea do the trick for others.

Melatonin is a supplement available at pharmacies in the vitamin aisle. It is not habit forming. It has been recommended by sleep experts for years both to decrease the time it takes to fall asleep and help patients stay asleep. Melatonin is safe and effective even in children.

- Melatonin 1mg may be used at 3 pm as a supplement dose to aid sleep
- 3 to 5 mg may be used 30 minutes before bedtime as a sleep aide.
- If 5mg doesn't help it is unlikely that higher doses will help and please notify us before giving more than 5mg
- Side effects are not common and can include more vivid dreams or nightmares. Occasionally patients report feeling groggy in the AM.

If sleep is still a problem for your child then we may need to consider a sleep evaluation and consultation with a sleep expert. Please let us know if your child snores frequently or has pauses in his/her breathing during sleep, sleep walks or has other less common sleep problems.

We sometimes add an afternoon dose of medication for ADHD symptoms. This can help with sleep or disrupt it. Usually sleep issues occur soon after the medication wears off. We'll work with you until your child is getting a restful night's sleep most nights!

FOCUS on EXERCISE

Exercise is good for everyone's focus. Kids with ADHD learn better when they can move!

- Support PE in school and ask that this important part of your child's day not be restricted by adding more seatwork or instruction in the classroom!
- Unstructured outdoor play is the best exercise for younger children. Sitting in a baseball dugout is not exercise! Adding sports that require concentration on school days can add to problems with brain fatigue and frustration.
- In older elementary kids and teens often get exercise with team sports or dance but many find focus with bike riding, running, swimming, or other aerobic activity.
- Exercise and walking have both been found to be helpful for anxiety, depression, attention and mental health in general.

FOCUS on ADDING FREE TIME to EACH DAY and SHARE SOME WITH YOUR CHILD

- Remember that fresh air and sunshine are good for everyone's mental health. Limit screen time to help your child get plenty of both! A good rule of thumb—keep total screen time below 2 hours/day.
- **It's a paradox that ADHD brains are easily bored but they also crave unstructured time** for wondering, wandering, and daydreaming without a time frame.

focus^{MD} ...We're More Than Meds!

- We encourage time in nature, unstructured play, creative time—drawing/painting, listening to music, playing music unstructured dance and building things without a kit or computer—Legos!
- When parents can engage in these child- directed activities that let a kid be a kid without a goal or purpose, it can be even better. Not having a goal/task to complete and meeting your child's ADHD brain on its own terms can really promote your relationship and decrease stress! Even five minutes of CHILD DIRECTED child/parent interaction has been shown to be helpful.
- Adding more and more activities that require focus can overwhelm ADHD patients and make them irritable. They need time to replenish their dopamine! Free time allows them to put a little more gas in the attention tank.