

Treatment for Adult ADHD

A Guide to Finding Treatments That Work



Are you an adult struggling with ADHD?

There are many safe, effective treatments that can help—and treatment doesn't necessarily mean pills or doctors' offices. Any action you take to manage your symptoms can be considered treatment. And while you may want to seek professional help along the way, ultimately, you are the one in charge. You don't have to wait for a diagnosis or rely on professionals. There's a lot you can do to help yourself—and you can start today.

Medication is a tool, not a cure for adult ADHD

When you think about treatment for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), previously known as ADD, do you immediately jump to Ritalin or Adderall? Many people equate ADHD treatment with medication. But it's important to understand that medication for ADHD doesn't work for everyone, and even when it does work, it won't solve all your problems or completely eliminate symptoms.

In fact, while medication for ADHD often improves attention and concentration, it typically does very little to help symptoms of disorganization, poor time management, forgetfulness, and procrastination—the very issues that cause the most [problems for many adults with ADHD](#).

Medication for ADHD is more effective when combined with other treatments. You will get much more out of your medication if you also take advantage of other treatments that address emotional and behavioral issues and teach you new coping skills.

Everyone responds differently to ADHD medication. Some people experience dramatic improvement while others experience little to no relief. The side effects also differ from person to person and, for some, they far outweigh the benefits. Because everyone responds differently, finding the right medication and dose takes time.

ADHD medication should always be closely monitored. Medication treatment for ADHD involves more than just taking a pill and forgetting about it. You and your doctor will need to monitor side effects, keep tabs on how you're feeling, and adjust the dosage accordingly. When medication for ADHD is not carefully monitored, it becomes less effective and more risky.

If you choose to take medication for ADHD, that doesn't mean you have to stay on it forever. Although it isn't safe to bounce off and on any drug repeatedly, you can safely decide to stop treating your ADHD with medication if things aren't going well. If you want to stop taking medication, be sure to let your doctor know your plans and work with them to taper off your medication slowly.

Regular exercise is a powerful treatment for ADHD

Exercising regularly is one of the easiest and most effective ways to reduce the symptoms of ADHD in adults and improve concentration, motivation, memory, and mood. [Physical activity](#) burns off extra energy that can lead to impulsivity. It also immediately boosts the brain's dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin levels—all of which affect focus and attention. In this way, exercise and medications for ADHD such as Ritalin and Adderall work similarly. But unlike ADHD medication, exercise doesn't require a prescription and it's side-effect free.

Try to exercise on most days. You don't have to go to the gym. A 30-minute walk four times a week is enough to provide benefits. Thirty minutes of activity every day is even better.

Pick something enjoyable, so you'll stick with it. Choose activities that play to your physical strengths or that you find challenging yet fun. Team sports can be a good choice because the social element keeps them interesting.

Get out into nature. Studies show that spending time in nature can reduce the symptoms of ADHD. Double up on the benefits by combining "green time" with exercise. Try hiking, trail running, or walking in a local park or scenic area.

The importance of sleep in ADHD treatment

Many adults with ADHD have sleep difficulties. The most common problems include:

Trouble getting to sleep at night, often because racing thoughts are keeping you up.

Restless sleep. You may toss and turn throughout the night, tear the covers off, and wake up at any little noise.

Difficulty waking up in the morning. Waking up is a daily struggle. You may sleep through multiple alarms and feel groggy and irritable for hours after getting up.

Poor quality sleep makes the symptoms of ADHD worse, so getting on a regular sleep schedule is essential. [Improving the quality of your sleep](#) can make a big difference in your attention, focus, and mood.

Tips for getting better sleep

Have a set bedtime and stick to it, and get up at the same time each morning, even if you're tired.

Make sure your bedroom is completely dark and keep electronics out (even the dim light from digital clocks or your cellphone can disrupt sleep).

Avoid caffeine later in the day, or consider cutting it out entirely.

Implement a quiet hour or two before bed. Try to turn off all screens (TV, computer, smartphone, etc.) at least one hour before bedtime.

If your medication is keeping you up at night, talk with your doctor about taking a lower dose or taking it earlier in the day.

Eating right can help you regulate ADHD symptoms

When it comes to diet, managing ADHD is as much of a matter of *how* you eat as *what* you eat. Most of the nutritional problems among adults with ADHD are the result of impulsiveness and poor planning. Your goal is to be mindful of your eating habits. That means planning and shopping for healthy meals, scheduling meal times, preparing food before you're already starving, and keeping healthful, easy snacks on hand so you don't have to run to the vending machine or grab dinner at Burger King.

Schedule regular meals or snacks no more than three hours apart. Many people with ADHD eat erratically—often going without a meal for hours and then binging on whatever is around. This isn't good for your symptoms of ADHD or your emotional and physical health.

Make sure you're getting enough zinc, iron, and magnesium in your diet. Consider a daily multivitamin if you're unsure.

Try to include a little protein and complex carbohydrates at each meal or snack. These foods will help you feel more alert while decreasing hyperactivity. They will also give

you steady, lasting energy.

Avoid junk food. While a connection hasn't been proved, many experts believe that food colorings and additives often found in junk foods and sodas may trigger or exacerbate ADHD symptoms.

Cut back on sugar and caffeine. Many of us drink caffeine or eat sugary foods for a quick energy boost, but that can soon lead to a crash in mood, energy, and focus. Cutting back may help to keep your blood sugar levels stable throughout the day and improve your sleep at night.

Add more omega-3 fatty acids to your diet. A growing number of studies show that omega-3s improve mental focus in people with ADHD. Omega-3s are found in salmon, tuna, sardines, and some fortified eggs and milk products. While it's more beneficial to get Omega-3s from food, fish oil and algae supplements are easy ways to boost your intake.

Choosing a fish oil supplement

The two main types of omega-3 fatty acids in fish oil: EPA and DHA. Supplements differ in the ratio of each. Your best bet for relieving the symptoms of ADHD is a supplement that has at least 2-3 times the amount of EPA to DHA.

Relaxation techniques to treat adult ADHD

Many of the symptoms of ADHD can be mitigated by [relaxation techniques such as meditation and yoga](#). When practiced consistently, these calming therapies can increase attention and focus and decrease impulsivity, anxiety, and depression.

Mindfulness meditation is a form of focused contemplation that relaxes the mind and the body and centers your thoughts. Researchers say that in the long run, meditation increases activity in the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for attention, planning, and impulse control. In a way, meditation is the opposite of ADHD. The goal of meditation is to train yourself to focus your attention with the goal of achieving insight. So, it's a workout for your attention span that also might help you understand and work out problems. As well as helping you to better resist distractions, lower impulsivity, and improve your focus, developing mindfulness through meditation can also provide [more control over your emotions](#), something that many adults with ADHD struggle with.

Yoga and related activities such as tai chi combine the physiological benefits of exercise with the psychological effects of meditation. It can be especially effective if you find you're too hyperactive to meditate. You learn deep breathing and other relaxation techniques that

help you become centered and mentally aware. By holding different postures for extended periods, you can cultivate balance and stillness. When you feel overwhelmed or out of control, you can turn to yoga techniques to refresh you and put you back in mental balance.

Therapy for adult ADHD can teach you better coping skills

Treatment for ADHD can also mean seeking outside help. Professionals trained in ADHD can help you learn new skills to cope with symptoms and change habits that are causing problems.

Some therapies focus on managing stress and anger or controlling impulsive behaviors, while others teach you how to handle time and money more effectively and improve your organizational skills.

Talk therapy. Adults with ADHD often struggle with issues stemming from longstanding patterns of underachievement, failure, academic difficulties, job turnover, and relationship conflict. Individual talk therapy can help you deal with this emotional baggage, including low self-esteem, the feelings of embarrassment and shame you may have experienced as a child and teenager, and resentment at the nagging and criticism you receive from people close to you.

Marriage and family therapy. Marriage and family therapy addresses the [problems ADHD can create in your relationships](#) and family life, such as conflicts over money problems, forgotten commitments, responsibilities in the home, and impulsive decisions. Therapy can help you and your loved ones explore these issues and focus on constructive ways of dealing with them and communicating with each other. Therapy can also improve your relationships by educating your partner and family members about ADHD.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy. Cognitive-behavioral therapy encourages you to identify and change the negative beliefs and behaviors that are causing problems in your life. Since many individuals with ADHD are demoralized from years of struggle and unmet expectations, one of the main goals of cognitive-behavioral therapy is to transform this negative outlook into a more hopeful, realistic view. Cognitive-behavioral therapy also focuses on the practical issues that often come with ADHD, such as disorganization, work performance problems, and poor time management.

Coaches and professional organizers for adult ADHD

In addition to physicians and therapists, there are a number of other professionals who can help you overcome the challenges of adult ADHD.

Behavioral coaching for adult ADHD is not a traditional form of therapy, but it can be a valuable part of ADHD treatment. In contrast to traditional therapists who help people work through emotional problems, coaches focus solely on practical solutions to problems in everyday life. Behavioral coaches teach you strategies for organizing your home and work environment, structuring your day, prioritizing tasks, and managing your money. ADHD coaches may come to your home or talk with you on the phone rather than meet with you in an office; many coach-client relationships are long-distance.

Professional organizers for adult ADHD can be very helpful if you have difficulty organizing your belongings or your time. Organizers can help you reduce clutter, develop better organizational systems, and learn to manage your time efficiently. A professional organizer comes to your home or workplace, looks at how you have things organized (or not organized), and then suggests changes. In addition to helping you to organize your paperwork and bill paying, a professional organizer has recommendations for memory and planning tools, filing systems, and more. A professional organizer also helps with time-management: your tasks, your to-do list, and your calendar.

Recommended reading

[Fast Minds: How to Thrive If You Have ADHD \(Or Think You Might\)](#) - Harvard Health Books

[Treatments for ADHD](#) - Types of ADHD treatments and therapies. (MyADHD.com)

[Exercise and the ADHD Brain](#) - Benefits of exercise as a treatment for ADHD. (ADDitude)

[Train The Brain: Using Neurofeedback To Treat ADHD](#) - New developments in the use of neurofeedback to treat ADHD. (NPR)

[Mindfulness and ADHD \(PDF\)](#) - How mindfulness can help ADHD symptoms. (CHADD)

[Coaching](#) - How ADHD coaching works and how it differs from other interventions. (CHADD)

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