**Medication**

**Medications and how they work**

Medication is not a permanent or a magic “cure” for ADHD, but it can help someone with the condition concentrate better, be less impulsive, feel calmer, and learn and practice new skills. The first-line recommended treatment for ADHD is medication, but a combination of medication and therapy is often the best way to treat it, although some people cannot take tablets for medical reasons, or do not wish to.

Treatment will usually be arranged by a psychiatrist, although your GP may take over prescribing and monitoring your health on the tablets. After detailed and careful medical checks, you would start with a low dose and work up to the best one for you, monitored by your doctor. Most people can find the right medication and dose for them to avoid side effects. Some medications need to be taken every day, but some can just be taken on college/work days.

**There are four medications used in the UK for the treatment of ADHD**

Most medications used are *stimulants*:

1. Methylphenidate (e.g. Ritalin, Concerta XL)
2. Dexamfetamine
3. Lisdexamfetamine

They work by causing more dopamine and/or noradrenaline (neurotransmitters) to be released into the synapses (gaps) between nerves, and/or causing it to stay there longer so the effect is greater. They work on the day you take them and are available in short-acting and slow-release forms.

Other drugs are *non-stimulants*:

4. Atomoxetine (Strattera)

This is called a selective noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor (SNRI), which means it increases the amount of noradrenaline in the synapses by preventing it from getting removed so quickly. This chemical passes messages between brain cells, and increasing the amount can aid concentration and help control impulses. It must be taken every day and takes several weeks to show an effect.
Common side effects can be loss of appetite, insomnia, increased rebound symptoms as the drug wears off, stomach upsets, headaches, irritability or mood changes, increased heart rate or blood pressure. Be sure to tell your doctor of any changes that you notice.

**Why are stimulant ADHD medications controlled drugs?**

ADHD medications are legal but come under the Misuse of Drugs Act as they have the potential to be abused. Because people without ADHD can also improve their concentration on the drugs, it is sometimes abused by those wanting to improve their performance at work or when studying. Abuse is increasing amongst college students seeking an advantage and by others looking for a ‘high’. Methylphenidate and dexamfetamine are considered Class B drugs (which include drugs such as cannabis and amphetamines). You could therefore be prosecuted for possessing them without a prescription or for dealing in them. Non-stimulant medication such as atomoxetine is not controlled.

Because of this, you need to take your medication as prescribed and be properly monitored. Prescriptions are written on a short-term basis for no longer than 30 days at a time.

**Other possible treatments**

There are other ways of treating ADHD that some people with the condition find helpful, such as cutting out certain foods and taking supplements. As yet, there is no strong evidence these treatments work, and you should seek medical advice before trying them.

**Diet**

People with ADHD should eat a healthy, balanced diet. Some people may notice a link between types of food and worsening ADHD symptoms. For example, sugar, food colourings and additives are often blamed for aggravating hyperactivity, and some people believe they have intolerances to wheat or dairy products, which may add to their symptoms.
If this is the case, keep a diary of what you eat and drink, and think about making changes or talking to a dietitian (a healthcare professional who specialises in nutrition).

**Supplements**

Some studies have suggested that supplements of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids may be beneficial in people with ADHD, although the evidence supporting this is somewhat limited, with very high doses of specific types of supplement required for very modest benefit (Cooper et al. 2015). Talk to your doctor if you are considering this.

**How well do the drugs work?**

There are fewer randomised control trials of stimulant treatment with adults, but the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) committee reviewed the evidence and concluded that trials “consistently demonstrate the effectiveness of stimulants to reduce the level of ADHD in adults with the condition” (NICE 2008). Methylphenidate was found to be effective in reducing core symptoms and led to global clinical improvement compared to placebo. Both lisdexamfetamine and atomoxetine are also licensed as effective in the treatment of ADHD in adults.
Sleep

Problems with sleep are common in ADHD. People report problems with getting to sleep, getting up in the morning, or feeling sleepy during the day. There is evidence that this is part of the ADHD syndrome, as the brain systems involved in governing sleep/arousal are closely tied with those governing attention. Restlessness of the body and mind are core symptoms causing problems getting to sleep, whilst those with predominantly inattentive symptoms may find it hard to keep awake, especially if there is not enough stimulation. Poor sleep in turn can affect concentration and make your ADHD symptoms worse. Sleep may be one of the most important things to tackle to improve symptoms of ADHD.

Why can’t I sleep? Psychological reasons

- You may still feel on-the-go at bedtime and find it hard to relax.
- You may worry that you won’t sleep and how tired you will be if you don’t.
- If you work in the bedroom, the room can be associated with things other than sleep.
- Anxiety or depression can cause you to worry at night or wake early.
- Disorganisation or irregular working hours make it difficult to maintain a routine.
- Sleeping in late, or taking naps in the day, makes it very difficult to sleep that night.
- If you procrastinate, you may end up working into the evening or not completing work and worrying at night.

Why can’t I sleep? Physical reasons

- Stimulant medication can sometimes interfere with sleep.
- Alcohol or caffeine drinks such as coffee or cola (especially if drunk later in the day) can disrupt sleep.
- Eating late at night keeps your body actively digesting food.
- Too many drinks before bed can mean you get up for the toilet and struggle to get back to sleep.
• Physical activity late in the evening can be disruptive for sleep.
• You may be more sensitive to noises, lights or temperatures at night, which can cause disrupted sleep.
• You may have other health problems such as pain or sleep apnoea.

So how can I sleep better?

What are your top tips for sleeping well?

Our suggestions . . .

Many of the strategies to help you to sleep, often referred to as ‘sleep hygiene’, may seem like common sense, but sometimes we need to go back to basics!

• Be aware of any patterns and whether these are linked to your environment. If you are waking up at the same time each night, try to work out if there is an external stimuli causing this.
• Stick to a routine.
• Don’t take long naps in the day – but do relax!
• Have a night-time routine and carry this out before you are tired and ready to sleep. Have a winding down time of reading, listening to music or bathing, like you would for a child!

Remove physical obstacles to sleep

• Avoid eating large amounts of food before bed.
• Also avoid smoking, drinking alcohol or caffeine.
• The use of cannabis has been shown to worsen the quality of sleep, particularly in high doses or with consistent use. In addition, withdrawal symptoms can occur after prolonged use, which can further affect sleep. Although alcohol makes you feel sleepy, it does prevent you from getting deep sleep.

Improve sleep habits

• It may help you to relax to make a list of what you are going to do for the next day before going to bed.
• Try to keep to roughly the same time of going to bed each night. Don’t start things late in the evening, even if it’s just reading or watching TV.
• Don’t go to bed until you are tired. Set your bedtime to be close to the time you are actually falling asleep. It is important that you associate being in bed with falling asleep, not lying awake. For example, if you normally get to sleep at 2 am, go to
bed at 1:50 am, and try bringing it backwards by 15 minutes at a time, to the time you would ideally like to be going to sleep.

- The bed must become associated with sleeping, not other activities like looking at your phone, watching TV or reading thrillers. Do these things elsewhere.

- Don’t lie awake for long periods tossing and turning. Lying in bed frustrated that you cannot sleep will not help you to sleep. Get up, do something relaxing and return to bed again; repeat if necessary. While you are in bed trying to sleep, use relaxation methods, and try self-talk when worries come into your mind: “Now is not the time”, “At least I’m resting, I’ll be fine.”

Getting up in the morning

- Possibly the most important tip: try to wake with an alarm and get up at the same time of day even on weekends, and even if you are tired – at least for the period in which you are trying to sort out your sleep problems.

- Some people with ADHD like to set two alarm clocks. The idea is to take medication when awaking the first time, so that when the second alarm goes off, the medication will have started to work and it will be easier to get up.

- Wake up with light – to wake up naturally. You could use a lamp on a timer or ask your partner or parent to open the curtains when they get up. There are a number of alarm clocks on the market which emit light before your alarm goes off.