



Understanding ADHD Treatment in Children

Purpose of this handout

This guide explains common ADHD treatment options, what to expect from medication and behavioral supports, how school accommodations may help, and when to contact your child's healthcare team.

WHAT IS ADHD?

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that can affect attention, activity level, impulse control, emotional regulation, school performance, and relationships. ADHD often begins in childhood and may continue into adolescence and adulthood.

DOES MY CHILD NEED TREATMENT?

Treatment may be helpful when ADHD symptoms are causing problems at home, school, socially, or emotionally. Untreated ADHD can increase the risk of academic problems, behavior concerns, low self-esteem, strained relationships, accidents, and later work or school difficulties.

- Treatment goals are practical: better focus, safer behavior, improved school follow-through, fewer conflicts, and stronger daily routines.
- Treatment is individualized. Some children need behavioral supports only; others benefit most from medication plus home and school strategies.
- Your provider will help decide what is appropriate based on age, symptoms, safety, school functioning, and family preference.

MAIN TREATMENT OPTIONS

Treatment option	Best used for	Key points
Behavioral parent training	Preschool children and many school-aged children	Builds consistent routines, rewards, expectations, and calm discipline strategies.
School supports	Children with classroom impairment	May include seating changes, written assignments, extra time, report cards, IEP, or 504 supports.
Medication	School-aged children when clinically appropriate	Stimulants are commonly first-line; nonstimulants may be used when stimulants are not tolerated or not appropriate.
Counseling / skills support	Emotional, social, or organizational concerns	Can support coping skills, routines, family communication, and self-management.

STIMULANT MEDICATIONS

Stimulant medications are commonly used for school-aged children with ADHD when the diagnosis is clear and medication is appropriate. They do not cure ADHD or teach skills by themselves, but they can improve attention, concentration, and self-control so the child can use skills more effectively.

- Common stimulant categories include methylphenidate-based medications and amphetamine-based medications.
- Short-acting forms may work within 30 to 40 minutes and may need more than one daily dose.
- Long-acting forms are usually taken once daily, most often in the morning.
- The dose is usually started low and adjusted carefully to find the best balance of benefit and side effects.

Medication safety reminder

Stimulant medication should be taken only as prescribed. It should not be shared, sold, traded, saved for someone else, or carried loosely in a backpack. If a school dose is needed, the medication should be stored and given by the school nurse or authorized staff.

Common stimulant side effects

- Decreased appetite or weight loss
- Trouble falling asleep
- Headache, stomach discomfort, nervousness, irritability, moodiness, or social withdrawal
- Less commonly: increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, or circulation symptoms in hands/feet

Many side effects are mild or improve with dose timing, meal timing, or medication adjustment. Call your child's provider if side effects are persistent, concerning, or interfere with daily life.

When to contact the clinic urgently

- Chest pain, fainting, severe shortness of breath, or concerning heart symptoms
- New hallucinations, severe agitation, panic, hostility, suicidal thoughts, or sudden major behavior changes
- Yellowing of the skin or eyes if taking atomoxetine
- Severe allergic reaction, severe rash, or any symptom that feels dangerous

NONSTIMULANT MEDICATIONS

Nonstimulant medications may be used when stimulants are not appropriate, not tolerated, or not effective enough. They usually need to be taken consistently and should not be stopped or skipped without discussing it with your provider.

Medication type	Examples	Common side effects / notes
Atomoxetine / viloxazine	Strattera-type medications, Qelbree	May affect appetite, stomach, sleep, mood, and rarely liver symptoms or suicidal thinking.
Guanfacine / clonidine ER	Intuniv-type medications, clonidine ER	May cause sleepiness, dizziness, headache, stomach pain, or lower heart rate/blood pressure.

BEHAVIORAL SUPPORTS AT HOME

Behavioral strategies help children succeed by making expectations clear, reducing distractions, and rewarding the behaviors you want to see more often.

- Use a predictable daily schedule for mornings, homework, meals, and bedtime.
- Keep distractions low during homework or chores.
- Create specific places for schoolwork, backpack, clothes, toys, and medication if applicable.
- Set small, reachable goals and give clear, brief instructions.
- Reward positive behavior quickly and consistently, such as with sticker charts or earned privileges.
- Use checklists, visual reminders, timers, and short movement breaks.
- Limit choices when your child feels overwhelmed.
- Use calm discipline: redirect, remove from the situation, or use brief time-out when appropriate.

SCHOOL SUPPORTS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Children with ADHD may need classroom supports even when treatment is working. If attention improves but your child still struggles in reading, math, writing, or another specific academic area, ask the school about evaluation for a learning disorder.

- Preferential seating near the front or away from distractions
- Written homework instructions or online assignment tracking
- Extra time for classwork or tests when appropriate
- Private cue from the teacher when off-task
- Daily or weekly school-home report card
- Resource support, IEP evaluation, or Section 504 plan when appropriate

COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS

Families sometimes ask about special diets, supplements, neurofeedback, chiropractic care, vision training, or other nontraditional treatments. Some may be low risk, but many are expensive and not proven to replace standard ADHD treatment. Natural does not always mean safe.

Questions to ask before trying an alternative treatment

Does it claim to cure ADHD? Is it supported by multiple published studies? Is it expensive? Could it delay proven treatment? Is the person offering it licensed and experienced in ADHD care? Please discuss supplements or alternative treatments with your child's provider before starting them.

LIVING WITH ADHD

- ADHD often runs in families. Parents or siblings may also notice similar symptoms and may benefit from evaluation.
- Adolescents with untreated ADHD have a higher risk of driving accidents. Families should plan a longer supervised driving period and discuss medication timing, distraction, and safe-driving expectations.
- Support matters. Parenting a child with ADHD can be tiring. Ask for help from family, school staff, counselors, and support groups.
- Many children continue to have ADHD symptoms as teens or adults, but strong routines, treatment, and skills can improve long-term functioning.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR CHILD'S PROVIDER

- What symptoms are we trying to improve first?
- How will we measure whether treatment is helping?
- What side effects should we watch for?
- When should we adjust the dose or medication?
- What should we tell the school?
- Should my child have a 504 plan, IEP evaluation, or learning assessment?