

## ADHD INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

# How to help your child sleep better



*If bedtime is a struggle for your child with ADHD, you are not alone.*

About 50 percent of children with ADHD have problems with sleep. The most common difficulty is falling asleep. Children with ADHD may take up to 1 or even 2 hours to fall asleep once you put them to bed. As a parent, you can find ways to help your child—and yourself—to deal with this challenge successfully.

### Why this problem occurs

Kids with ADHD have trouble with self-management. It is hard for them to control their impulses, their activity level, and their ability to focus on one thing at a time. So, they may also have difficulty with normal sleep.

There are three main reasons for this:

- The ADHD itself, which can make kids overly sensitive to stimulation.
- Distraction because of noises in their rooms.
- The medication kids take to help manage their ADHD may cause sleeplessness.

As a result, many ADHD children are night owls. They stay up late and have trouble getting up in the morning.

Ideally, ADHD children would live in a world in which the school day starts at noon, but, unfortunately, they have to get up early for school. Falling asleep late and getting up early makes any child tired

the next day, especially during the first few hours of the morning. But there are ways to help your child with sleep.

### How you can help

- First, talk with your doctor to determine the most likely cause of your child's sleep problem.
- Try not to blame your child for the sleep problem. Most children want to fall asleep more easily, but they can't.
- If the sleep problem is due to the ADHD itself, keep a log for two weeks of how long it takes your child to fall asleep each night. This will help you and your doctor decide how significant the problem is, and how best to address it.
- If the problem is significant, work on improving your child's sleep habits through some of the following techniques:
  - Avoid having your child take afternoon naps, if possible. Naps may prevent your child from getting tired enough at night.
  - Try to get your child to be physically active in the afternoon. Exercise often helps with sleep later at night.
  - Have your child take a warm bath or long shower one hour before bed.
  - After the bath or shower, have your child engage only in quiet activities to help him/her calm down and prepare to fall asleep.

- For some children, reading before bed may help with relaxation. (Some children get stimulated by reading. If so, then avoid this activity.)
- Playing music may help relax your child. Let your child choose the type of music. Some children actually calm down with rock music. If your child gets stimulated by such music, try quieter music.
- Turning on a fan (or other white noise) will sometimes block out distracting noises and allow your child to fall asleep.
- A healthy snack before bed may help. Avoid added sugar. Eating before bed may keep some kids up. If that happens, stop offering a snack.
- All children should avoid caffeinated drinks, such as coffee, or cola.
- Spend quiet time with your child before bed. Reading to or cuddling with your child can be very soothing.
- Relaxation techniques can be a very useful way for your child to relax. Using one simple technique, your child will tense a group of muscles, such as the neck and shoulders, for 15-30 seconds. Then have your child tighten another group of muscles and relax in the same way. Continue this pattern of tightening and relaxing different sets of muscles for several minutes. When finished, your child may be much more relaxed and ready to sleep.

These techniques can help many children with sleep problems. If you've tried the approaches above for several weeks and are still having difficulties, medication may also help. It's important to discuss options with your doctor.

### Medicines that can help

- Melatonin is a normal body hormone that helps many people fall sleep. In studies, it has been shown to help ADHD children fall asleep in doses between 2 mg and 5 mg given at night. It hasn't been studied as extensively as other sleep medications, but appears to be safe.
- *Dyphenhydramine (Benadryl)* at doses of 12.5 mg to 50 mg one hour before bed. *Dyphenhydramine* comes in a liquid form (12.5 mg/5ml), a chewable tablet (12.5mg), and a non-chewable tablet (12.5mg). This medication is an antihistamine with few side effects except drowsiness and dry mouth, but you should check with your doctor to make sure there are no concerns over using it. Some children stay sleepy too long on *Benadryl* and may be tired the next day. If prolonged sleepiness still happens after using the medicine for more than one week, then stop using it. Also, the effect may lessen over time, so this might not be a good choice for prolonged use.
- Another choice is clonidine. Clonidine is a prescription medication that has been very

effective for sleep problems in ADHD children. Of the three medications mentioned, it has been studied the most extensively. Rarely, some children have problematic changes in pulse or blood pressure with clonidine, so your child needs to have blood pressure and pulse monitored by your doctor during its use.

If you use some or all of these approaches, it is very likely your child will have improved sleep. Getting more rest will make a positive difference for your child in school and at home.

### Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org) to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

### Web sites

- National Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA): [add.org](http://add.org)
- Children with Attention Deficit Disorders (CHADD): [chadd.org](http://chadd.org)

### Books

- *All About Attention Deficit Disorder*, by Thomas Phelan, 2003.
- *Straight Talk about Psychiatric Medications for Kids*, by Timothy Wilens, 2004.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your child's physician or other health care professional. If your child has persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your child's doctor. If you have questions or need additional information about your child's medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.