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## New approach to ADD, ADHD

By Evelyn Gilbert Manziello  
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Dr. Joseph T. Malak, a pediatrician, talks with a mother of a patient last month at Bambini Pediatrics in the Town of Poughkeepsie. Malak treats his ADD and ADHD patients with a variety of methods, with medication as a last resort. / Karl Rabe/The Poughkeepsie Journal

With the dramatic increase in the number of kids diagnosed with ADD or ADHD, many concerned and dissatisfied parents are seeking alternatives to prescription drugs. If you want to ditch the meds, or also include natural remedies that may be more effective in the long run, there are many options available including diet, exercise, and other lifestyle changes.

Integrative pediatricians Dr. Joseph T. Malak, founder of Bambini Pediatrics in Poughkeepsie, and Dr. Stephen S. Cowan, co-founder of Riverside Pediatrics in Croton-on-Hudson, who also has a consulting practice in Mount Kisco, use a variety of these methods to try to help their ADD and ADHD patients. They believe that prescription stimulant medicines, while necessary in some cases, just treat symptoms and don't offer a long-term cure for these conditions.

"Over the past 20 years, I have developed a holistic approach to ADHD based on the Chinese Medicine system of correspondences," said Cowan, whose book on the topic, "Fire Child-Water Child: How understanding the five types of ADHD helps you improve your child's self-esteem and attention," will be published early next year. "ADHD is a cry for help, not a broken brain."

Cowan, who is certified in medical acupuncture, believes there are basically five types of ADHD that reflect the five adaptive styles that children have. When a child is in an insecure state (because his environment is not acknowledging or supporting his nature), he will exhibit one of the five expressions of limbic system fight/flight responses.

"When we take the time to look at all the stressors in a child's life, we can map out a detailed approach that is customized for that child and develop low-cost strategies to help refine that child's attention," he said.

Some of his treatments include breathing exercises that help focus the mind and release tension as well as teaching kids how to pay attention to their thoughts and emotions.

"Studies have shown that this has a neurochemical effect on calming and refocusing the mind in a more effective way," he said, noting that each case is different. "Not all ADHD is just hyperactivity. There are many reasons children have trouble focusing. They may be bored, distracted by their own imagination, hyperfocused, overstimulated or anxious."

Dietary changes and acupuncture can also help, as well as meditation, he advises.

"One size does not fit all. We are all wired to pay attention, but it's what we're paying attention to that tells us what's going on," he said.

Malak, who at one time prescribed medications for kids with ADHD right away, became dissatisfied with the results he was seeing and changed his approach.

"I used to start off with prescription drugs. Now they're the last resort. After trying the prescription drug approach exclusively for 15 years, I just wasn't seeing vibrant health associated with long-term use of amphetamine-class medications in children," he said.

Now he customizes the treatment for each kid by first looking at the family dynamics.

"Is there discord in the home? Is this an attention deficit disorder or attention-getting disorder," he asks, noting he gets input from the kids' teachers about their behavior too. "We also look at the bedtime and the sleep quality. A kid who goes to bed at midnight during the week may have some difficulty focusing."

The next lifestyle issue he examines and adjusts is diet.

"Kids with ADHD that take meds typically have reduced appetite at lunchtime. If they skip breakfast, that could mean the first good meal of the day is dinner. That can lead to low blood sugar, headaches, brain fog, and sometimes excessive weight gain," he said.

Eating enough green vegetables is key.

"Just as iron forms the center of our hemoglobin molecule, magnesium is at the core of chlorophyll, the pigment that gives leaves their green color," Malak said. "Magnesium calms the nervous system, relaxes muscles, and supports the function of many enzymes."

Steering clear of soda is a good idea, since drinking it can cause blood sugar swings. Also, many sodas have artificial colors and flavors, some of which are known to affect neurotransmitters, he adds.

While Malak does prescribe prescription medications in some cases, "We encourage parents to give gentler options such as homeopathics (which by their nature are extraordinarily safe) or essential oils a fair trial first," he said.

Studies suggest kids with ADHD have lower than normal levels of the brain neurotransmitter dopamine, which helps regulate attention and mood.

Some experts believe the essential oils rosemary and lavender positively support dopamine levels.

These plant essences can be applied topically to the skin or inhaled. (Be sure to consult an expert before buying a product, since quality varies as do guidelines on how to use them.)

Research also indicates some ADHD sufferers are deficient in essential fatty acids, carnitine and zinc.

"Adding nutritional support such as fish oils into the mix may help kids focus and decrease mood swings," Malak said.

## Additional Facts

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