

ADDITUDE

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VITAMINS & MINERALS

10 Foods (and Supplements and Vitamins!) to Boost Your ADHD Brain

Medication does not cure ADHD, and it should never be the only treatment. Diet and nutrition play key roles in improving focus and cognitive function — particularly these supplements, herbal remedies, vitamins, and easy food food rules. Get started today!

BY ADDITUDE EDITORS

[Medication](#) helps many adults and children with ADHD, but it doesn't work for everyone.

“Parents and adults see me either because the medication isn't doing the job, or they want more improvement and can't increase the dosage without increasing side effects,” says Richard Brown, M.D., associate clinical professor of psychiatry at [Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons](#), and coauthor of the recent book *How to Use Herbs, Nutrients, and Yoga in Mental Health Care*.

Medication does not cure ADHD, and it should never be the only treatment, says Edward Hallowell, M.D., coauthor of the best-selling *Driven to Distraction: Recognizing and Coping with Attention Deficit Disorder from Childhood Through Adulthood*. “Diet and nutrition play key roles in how well the ADHD brain operates.” Toward that end, here are 10 foods, [ADHD supplements](#), and herbs that you should add to your treatment plan. As always, talk with your doctor first before doing so.

[Free Download: [What to Eat — And Avoid — to Improve ADHD Symptoms](#)]

Food for Focus

Poor nutrition can cause a child or adult with ADHD to become distracted, impulsive, and restless. The right foods, on the other hand, can lessen those symptoms.

Protein

Foods rich in [protein](#) — lean beef, pork, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, nuts, soy, and dairy products — are used by the body to make neurotransmitters, the chemicals released by brain cells to communicate with each other. Protein can prevent [surges in blood sugar](#), which increase hyperactivity.

“Because the body makes brain-awakening neurotransmitters when you eat protein, start your day with a breakfast that includes it,” says Laura Stevens, M.S., a nutritionist at Purdue University and author of *12 Effective Ways to Help Your ADD/ADHD Child: Drug-Free Alternatives for Attention-Deficit Disorders*. “Don't stop there. Look for ways to slip in lean protein during the day, as well.”

Balanced Meals

Hallowell suggests that you divide your lunch and dinner plate in the following way: Half of the plate should be filled with fruits and vegetables, one fourth with a protein, and the remaining fourth with a carbohydrate, preferably one rich in fiber – whole wheat pasta, whole grain bread, brown rice.

[Webinar Replay: [Food Fixes for Better Attention, Focus, and Cognition](#)]

This combination of foods will minimize swings in behavior caused by hunger or by a shortfall of a particular nutrient. Fiber prevents blood-sugar levels from spiking and plummeting, which can increase inattention.

Brain-Boosting Supplements

“Many diets are deficient in key vitamins and minerals that may improve attention and alertness,” says Brown. Supplements can often fill in the dietary gaps.

Multivitamin/Multimineral

If your child is a picky eater or eats lots of take-out food, he won't get the daily recommended value of vitamins and minerals. A daily multivitamin/multimineral will ensure that he does, no matter how finicky he is.

- To purchase: [Hero's Yummi Bears Multi-Vitamin & Mineral](#) are free of [artificial colors and flavors](#), which increase hyperactivity in some children with ADHD.

B Vitamins

Studies suggest that giving children who have low levels of B vitamins a supplement improved IQ scores (by 16 points) and reduced aggression and antisocial behavior. “Vitamin B-6 seems to increase the brain's levels of dopamine, which improves alertness,” says Brown.

- To purchase: Drugstore chains offer inexpensive high-quality, store-brand B-vitamin formulations. Many of the studies on vitamin B and ADHD used a Swiss formulation called Bio-Strath (available at [vitacost.com](#). It comes in pill and liquid forms.

Zinc, Iron, and Magnesium

Zinc synthesizes dopamine and augments the effects of methylphenidate. Low levels of this mineral correlate with inattention.

[6 Essential (and Often-Overlooked) Supplements for ADHD]

Iron is also necessary for making dopamine. In one small study, ferritin levels (a measure of iron stores) were low in 84 percent of ADHD children compared to 18 percent of the control group. [Low iron levels correlate with cognitive deficits](#) and severe ADHD.

“Adequate levels of magnesium have a calming effect on the brain,” says Brown. While diet is the safest way to increase mineral levels, a multivitamin/multimineral with iron will ensure that you or your child will get the daily reference value (DRV) of all three.

Benefits of Fish Oils

Omega-3s

One study suggested that a subgroup of boys with ADHD are deficient in omega-3 fatty acids compared with those who have no symptoms of the condition.

Another study showed that omega-3s—found in cold-water, fatty fish, such as sardines, tuna, and salmon—tend to break down more readily in the bodies of patients with ADHD than in those without the condition. “Individuals with ADHD who have low blood levels of omega-3s will show the biggest improvement in mental focus and cognitive function,” says Brown.

- To purchase: Ned Hallowell recommends supplements from [OmegaBrite](#) and [Zone Labs](#). Brown also recommends [Nordic Naturals](#). If your child has trouble swallowing pills, try the [Barleans](#)

Omega Swirl smoothie.

Picamilon

A combination of the B-vitamin niacin and gamma-aminobutyric acid, picamilon improves blood flow to the brain and has mild stimulative effects, improving alertness and attention. It can also reduce aggressive behavior. “Both adults and children derive benefits from this supplement,” says Brown.

- To purchase: Picamilon is available at [Smart Nutrition](#) and [IAS](#).

Treating Significant ADHD

“Most children and adults derive moderate benefits from the vitamin-mineral approach,” says Brown. “Those with more significant ADHD may need stronger stuff—namely, herbs.”

Ginkgo and Ginseng

“These herbs are cognitive activators,” says Brown. They act like stimulants without the side effects. Typically, adults and children who take ginkgo and ginseng improve on ADHD rating scales, and are less impulsive and distractible. Asian ginseng may overstimulate younger children. If this happens to your child, switch to American ginseng.

- To purchase: [Hsu’s Ginseng](#) is a reliable mail-order source for both versions of the herb. According to Brown, Ginkoba and Gingold are the most effective brands of ginkgo.

Pycnogenol

An extract made from French maritime pine bark, pycnogenol was found to improve hyperactivity and sharpen attention, concentration, and visual-motor coordination in students after one month, based on standardized measures and teacher and parent ratings.

The herb pycnogenol is also rich in polyphenols, antioxidants that protect brain cells from free radicals. “The first double-blind study on the herb was published in 2006, confirming its benefits,” says Brown. “Larger randomized trials, though, are needed.”

- To purchase: Pycnogenol is available at [Nature’s Best](#).

Rhodiola Rosea

Made from a plant of the same name that grows in the Arctic, this herb can improve alertness, attention, and accuracy. It can be too stimulating for young children, and is occasionally beneficial in children ages eight to 12. It is most useful, says Brown, for students in junior high, high school, and college, who have to complete long papers and spend hours reading.

- To purchase: Rhodiola rosea is available from [Ameriden International](#) and Swedish Herbal Institute-ProActive.

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