

Exercise As Medicine For ADD and ADHD

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One ADD/ADHD treatment that doesn't require a prescription or a visit to a physician's office is exercise. Research is finding that participating in a regular fitness routine can improve cognitive ability.

"Exercise turns on the attention system, the so-called executive functions — sequencing, working memory, prioritizing, inhibiting, and sustaining attention," writes John Ratey, M.D., an associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* (Little, Brown). "On a practical level, it causes kids to be less impulsive, which makes them more primed to learn."

Exercise is essential for everyone – especially people with ADD and ADHD. Exercise increases blood flow to the brain, and in the process, stimulates the release of brain-derived neurotrophic factors (BDNF) that promote the growth of new brain cells (neurons). When you exercise, your brain releases chemicals called neurotransmitters, including dopamine, which helps with attention and clear thinking. People with ADD and ADHD often have less dopamine than usual in their brains. Therefore, exercise is a vital component of treatment for ADD and ADHD and is something that makes it easier to sustain mental focus for extended periods of time.

Research has shown that innovative and creative approaches to fitness have helped kids - and adults - of all ages and abilities enjoy the benefits of physical activity. In my nearly 30 years of experience as a Certified Athletic Trainer and as a person with ADD, I suggest these fitness tips:

Set aside a specific time each day for fitness. If you know that you or your child has extra energy in the late afternoon, plan to work out at 5 PM each day. This will allow the person an opportunity to unwind from a hectic day and better regulate energy needed to complete homework, cook dinner or plan for the next day. By organizing your fitness routine, you can help yourself stay on task and better manage your time. Another thought is to exercise before going to school or prior to doing homework. A large study showed that students performed better in the classroom following 30 minutes of exercise. Test grades improved across the board. <http://sparkinglife.org/page/naperville-central-high-school>

Exercise every day. Exercise will help increase blood flow and release endorphins that will boost your mood and help clear your mind.

Choose an activity that is vigorous and fun. If you look forward to working out, you are more likely to stick to your fitness routine. Join a team sport or schedule walks with a neighbor. Plan a family fun night where one night each week is designated for Wii games, dance contests, sledding or any activity that gets your family moving. By exercising as a family, you have the opportunity to bond and create lifelong memories.

Change up your workout routine. Doing the same thing each day becomes boring. You want to remove excuses to not exercise. Keep it different. Keep it fun. Stay the course.

Take advantage of fitness technology. Do you stress over documenting your fitness milestones? Try Google's "My Tracks." My Tracks activates location data from GPS, cellular tower data and Wi-Fi to automatically record your speed, distance, and path when you walk, run, bike, or do any outdoor activity. To ensure you stay on task, you can view your data live and hear "periodic voice announcements of your progress."

Add meditation to your fitness routine. In addition to relieving stress, yoga or tai chi can help you focus your attention and improve impulse control.

The daily demands of school, work, and family can seem overwhelming if you or a loved one has ADD or ADHD. Using exercise as a "medicine," you can become more organized, better able to concentrate, and use your newfound focus to tackle new challenges. [wfm](http://www.wfm.com)

Marc Sickel has ADHD and created Fitness for Health because he wanted to help children faced with the same challenges he had growing up and to assist them in achieving their maximum potential through physical fitness. www.fitnessforhealth.org

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