

Meditate Before You Medicate

By Nancy Lonsdorf, MD

My 8-year-old son has just been diagnosed with ADHD. I'd like to keep him off medication if I can, but I want him to succeed in school. What kind of natural approaches are there?

First of all, you are not alone. One of the most common and difficult challenges facing parents and kids today, ADHD affects nearly one in 10 school-aged children. Its symptoms—inattentiveness, hyperactivity, and impulsive behavior—impair school and social performance, often causing overwhelmed teachers to pressure parents to put their children on drugs. But is trading better grades now for potential long-term side-effects really in your child's best interests?

Ironically, a natural approach to this very modern problem exists in the ancient healing practice of ayurveda. From herbal formulas to lifestyle and diet, ayurveda offers a range of approaches aimed at correcting the imbalance underlying the condition. While modern theories point to genetically-based chemical imbalances in the brain, ayurveda describes an imbalance in vata dosha, the mind-body principle that governs movement and mental activity. When it falls out of balance, the flow of electrical impulses in the brain become disturbed, which interferes with focus and behavioral control. While this imbalance may indeed involve a genetic component, ayurveda stresses that our lifestyle plays a crucial role in how our genes get expressed. To treat ADHD, ayurveda advises adopting specific dietary and lifestyle changes to balance vata.

One such approach—meditation—has attracted considerable media attention of late. But how, you ask, can your son possibly sit still long enough to meditate? Actually, a recent pilot study conducted on ADHD-diagnosed children who were instructed in Maharishi's Transcendental Meditation™ program yielded some surprising results. Conducted at Chelsea Academy in Washington, DC, by Sarina Grosswald, EdD and William Stixrud, PhD, the study found a 45 to 50 percent reduction in stress, anxiety, and depression after practicing the TM technique for just 10 minutes twice a day—and memory, concentration, and organizing skills improved as well.

One of the participants, 11-year-old Chana believes TM makes her less impulsive. "I'm starting to think before I talk to my friends," she says. And Will, also 11, says, "It's amazing how easy it is, and yet it does so much for you."

Creating a calming environment around your son can go a long way toward settling him down. Limit TV and video games. The combination of flickering screen light, mental excitation, and electromagnetic radiation in both activities can create a huge disturbance in vata. Instead, channel your child's energy into sports, free play outdoors, playing a musical instrument, or making art projects. Turn off the TV and computer at least an hour before bedtime, which should be no later than 8:30.

You can effectively calm vata dosha—which by nature is impulsive and irregular—by keeping to a regular daily routine. Scheduling your son's meals, bedtime, and waking at the same time every day, will have a calming and stabilizing effect. Giving your son a 5-

to 10-minute massage— called abhyanga—with organic olive oil each morning or evening will help relax his muscles and slow down his overactive mind. Vata-pacifying aromatherapy, such as lavender, holy basil, and orange blossom, can also have a calming effect, since our nostrils lead scents right into the mid-brain where emotions and attention are modulated.

As for diet, limit the sugar and avoid caffeine. Fresh and dried fruits and homemade desserts sweetened with fruits will help satisfy sugar cravings. Limit chips and other junk food, which often contain trans fats and stimulants such as MSG—disguised as “natural flavors” on labels. Favor more vegetarian meals of warm, cooked vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and fresh dairy products that calm the moving, light, dry vata dosha, and avoid raw and cold foods, red meat, and processed foods. Try cooked cereal for breakfast rather than dry, cold cereal, which aggravates vata. A cup of warm milk or soy milk flavored with cinnamon or cardamom before bed can help induce a restful sleep and prepare your son for the day to come.

While ADHD can be extremely challenging, these simple lifestyle changes have yielded big benefits in many children with ADHD. And even if you finally decide your child needs to take meds, the steps outlined here will support his good health now and in the years to come.

Sleep is natural to life—just look at how well babies do it—and any problems we encounter should have a natural solution. Our inner sleep rhythm should connect to the rhythms of nature, or more specifically of daylight. Normally, as daylight fades, the body’s biological clock triggers the release of melatonin from the pineal gland, making us feel sleepy. The onset of morning light triggers a drop in melatonin, causing us to wake up.

Yet if sleep is so natural, why do an estimated 75 percent of Americans develop sleep problems? Probably because our lifestyles have become so un-natural. Late nights, evening computer- and cell-phone use, and sleeping late all alter this natural pattern of melatonin secretion. Add alcohol and caffeine consumption and late-evening meals to those years of cumulative abuse, and you end up with chronic sleep problems. To top it off, melatonin production tends to decrease as we age, further reducing the quality of our sleep.

Ayurveda considers sleep to be one of three key pillars of health. It recognizes the role of biological rhythms and identifies six time periods throughout the day that affect sleep by affecting our doshas—the three fundamental processes that guide our body’s functioning. The doshas include mind and movement (vata), metabolism (pitta), and structure (kapha). To improve sleep, ayurveda suggests going to bed before 10 p.m., during the cycle dominated by the heavy, slow-moving kapha dosha, when you naturally feel more mellow and sleepy. If you go to bed then, you’ll fall asleep easier and your sleep will be deeper.

The other pivotal point in the daily cycle occurs at 6 a.m. If you wake up before then, during the time of the morning dominated by quick moving vata dosha, you should have more clarity and dynamism.

As you and your husband illustrate, not everyone suffers from the same sleep problem. If your mind is whirling, your body tense, and you can’t fall asleep, chances are you have a dominant vata dosha. Your husband’s sleep problem on the other hand, waking up between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m., usually stems from a disturbance in the hot pitta dosha. People who sleep eight hours but still feel exhausted commonly have an excess of the slow, heavy kapha dosha. In each case, it’s important to balance the dominant tendency with diet and lifestyle choices.

Ayurvedic Sleep Aids

If you have trouble falling asleep (vata)

- Go to bed before 10 p.m., earlier in winter.
- Rub warm olive oil on your head and feet right before bed to calm an overactive mind.
- Avoid caffeine, raw foods, crackers, cold cereal, and other dry, light foods that aggravate vata dosha.
- Avoid TV, intense phone conversations, and exercise after 9 p.m.
- Choose quiet evening activities to wind down, such as washing dishes, folding clothes, and other simple tasks.

If you wake up between 2 a.m. to 4 a.m. (pitta)

- Avoid computer use and other work at night. Organize a to-do list to get a head start on the morning and settle your mind before bed.
- Avoid arguments or controversial discussions at night.
- Take an evening walk to clear your brain and cool your body.
- Avoid spicy or fried foods at night.
- Eat a juicy pear every day to cool the hot pitta dosha.
- Drink warm milk flavored with cooling organic rose syrup before bed.
- Rub your head and feet with coconut oil before bed.

If you feel exhausted after a good night's sleep (kapha)

- Eat a light soup with whole-grain crackers or steamed vegetables for your evening meal.
- Flavor your food with digestion-stimulating spices, such as fresh ginger, cumin, and black pepper.
- Avoid meat, cheese, potatoes, and heavy desserts at supper, as these tend to clog the tissues, promoting snoring, apnea, stiffness, and morning lethargy.
- Make an effort to get up before 6 a.m.
- Exercise daily, if possible during the morning kapha cycle between 6 a.m. and 10 a.m.