

Children with ADHD benefit from healthy lifestyle options as first-line treatment

WINSTON-SALEM, NC, USA: Every year between 3 and 10% of school-age children in this country are diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Increasingly, families are using natural or complementary therapies to improve their child's attention or behavior, and often seek advice from an integrative pediatrician, according to a new study by researchers at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center.

"Many parents are reluctant to put their children on medication for ADHD, and instead want to first try healthy lifestyle options to help promote optimal focus and attention," said Kathi Kemper, MD, professor of public health sciences and pediatrics at Wake Forest Baptist, and lead author of the study.

Published in the January issue of the journal *Focus on Alternative and Complementary Therapies*, the research is the first to study what parents who seek natural remedies for their child's ADHD are actually using or interested in learning about from an integrative pediatrician. The growing field of integrative pediatrics covers not only complementary therapies, but also focuses on health promotion, disease prevention, lifestyle coaching and coordinated team care.

In the study, the researchers reviewed intake forms, physician reports and laboratory studies for 75 new patients seen in an integrative pediatric clinic over a year and a half. Most of the patients (87%) were referred by their primary care physicians and the rest were referred by specialists. Among the patients, 31% of the families had concerns about ADHD, but only 13% of the children were taking medicine for the condition.

Emerging trend

The data suggest that these children often suffer from several chronic health conditions, receive care from multiple, diverse specialists as well as primary care clinicians, and take a variety of medications and supplements while avoiding ADHD medications. "Although it was a small study from one practice, we believe that it reflects an emerging trend among pediatricians and primary care providers," Kemper said.

The Wake Forest Baptist researchers showed that most families with ADHD children were interested in information about diet, exercise, stress management and sleep. Physician recommendations focused on health promotion information, dietary supplements, such as multivitamins/minerals and omega-3 fatty acids and referrals to specialists.

"For example, if your child has trouble concentrating in his mid-morning math class, be sure he eats a really good breakfast, or try having him go to bed an hour earlier to see if that helps," Kemper said. "If your child can't sit still to do homework when he gets home from school, have him go outside to shoot some hoops and then try doing homework. I recommend using low-risk, healthy lifestyle approaches first before resorting to medication."

For parents interested in finding an integrative pediatrician, Kemper recommends the American Academy of Pediatrics' website under the Section on Complementary and Integrative Medicine for a list of board-certified integrative pediatricians.

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