

# THE ADHD GUIDE FOR PARENTS

## 9 WAYS TO SUPPORT THE ADHD BRAIN



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*The Roadmap To Resilient Kids*



Functional Nutrition considers that ADHD and ADD are shaped by how your child's **genetics** interact with what's happening **inside their body** (like nutrition, inflammation, neural networks, and gut health), and what's going on **around them** (like stress, expectations, and relationships).

Kids with ADD and ADHD often have some great superpowers, like creativity and divergent thinking. But tendencies like inattention, impulsivity, lack of follow-through, daydreaming, and hyperactivity can really throw them down a destructive path if left unchecked.

ADHD isn't something we are setting out to "cure." But lifestyle, diet, and environmental changes can improve how your ADHD child feels and functions. This guide outlines low-risk, deeply practical ways to get started before deciding if you need to consider medication. Your child is unique, and there is no one-size-fits-all protocol for ADHD. Sometimes it takes a little trial and error to get the right plan in place. But outlined here are 9 factors to consider, based on the most current research.

**References are available [HERE](#)**

*This document is not medical advice; it is designed to guide you in supporting your own kids. There are many aspects to ADHD and no cookie-cutter protocol that works for everyone. Always cross-check supplement ingredients with known allergies. This document outlines a general approach and some of the products I have seen work. You may need a more customized protocol.*

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## 1. ADHD AND DIET

Research shows a link between diet and ADHD symptoms in children:

- Observational data tells us a **Mediterranean-style diet** rich in vegetables, fruits, legumes, fish, and whole grains can reduce ADHD symptoms by up to 37%, while a Western-style diet high in sugar, processed food, and saturated fats may as much as double the risk.
- A **maternal diet** low in fibre and micronutrients and high in sugar, along with obesity, diabetes, smoking, and chronic stress, raise ADHD risk in offspring.
- Foods high in **tyrosine**, like bananas, avocados, eggs, and lean protein, can support dopamine production and attention.
- Foods high in **fibre** and complex carbohydrates, like quinoa, lentils, chickpeas, sweet potatoes and apples, help keep **blood sugar** stable, which is important for kids with ADHD.
- Refined sugar gives a quick energy and serotonin hit, but then can start to deplete dopamine and stress out adrenal glands... not helpful for ADHD kids (not to mention, sugar messes with the microbiome... more on that below). **Keep sugar low.**



## TAKE-HOME FOR PARENTS

While it's unlikely that a poor diet "causes" ADHD, food can certainly moderate a child's ADHD symptoms. Foods help create neurotransmitters, moderate inflammation, impact gut health, and stimulate the nervous system. What your child eats influences how their brain works. Your ADHD child needs premium fuel.

- Prioritize colorful, whole foods with fibre, healthy fats, and protein for your ADHD child.
- A strong breakfast that includes fibre and protein, along with good hydration are foundational.
- Reduce sugar, sugary drinks, and dyes/additives.

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## 2. SUPPLEMENTS FOR ADHD

Several nutrients and herbal supplements have been assessed for ADHD symptom management. Here are some highlights.

- **Omega-3s (EPA/DHA) + Omega-6 (GLA):** Omega 3s (about 1-5g) have shown improved attention and behavior, especially when used for 4+ months. Some studies found that adding GLA alongside may work even better for some kids.
- **Vitamin D + Magnesium:** Supplementation was helpful when blood levels were initially low.
- **Zinc + Iron:** These have been found to be disproportionately low in kids with ADHD. High copper relative to zinc can be an issue too, since both copper and zinc are needed for proper dopamine function.
- **B Vitamins:** A meta-analysis of six studies involving nearly 1,000 children found that levels of vitamin B9 (folate) and B12 were significantly lower in children with ADHD. In adults, low B2 and B6 have also been associated with symptom severity.
- **Saffron (30mg/day) and Pycnogenol (1mg/kg/day):** Both have been shown to improve focus and behavior, even comparable to medication in some studies.
- **Phosphatidylserine (PS):** Has been shown to support attention. Some studies found that its effects are stronger when combined with omega-3s.
- **Amino Acids:** Tyrosine and DLPA, the building blocks for dopamine, can help executive function. 5HTP, Tryptophan, GABA, and Inositol can help kids manage the extra stress they may be experiencing because of their ADHD-related struggles.
- **Bacopa monnieri, Ginkgo Biloba, and Ginseng:** Have all shown some effect in clinical studies, though efficacy varies. Bacopa seems to show the most consistent benefits, improving inattention, hyperactivity, and memory, while Ginkgo and Ginseng seem to help more with inattention.



# DATA BRINGS CLARITY: FUNCTIONAL TESTING OPTIONS FOR ADHD

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Functional tests can play a key role in ADHD management by helping you “look under the hood”. Functional tests are not diagnostic; they look at key factors that influence function, so you know where to focus your efforts. Here are some recommendations.

## Step 1: Check nutrients

Check your child’s blood levels of the following nutrients:

- Vitamin D
- RBC Magnesium
- RBC or Plasma Zinc
- Serum Copper
- Iron (ferritin)
- Omega-3 index

For a child with ADHD symptoms, optimal ranges can be significantly narrower than they are for the general public. These are called "functional ranges". If nutrient levels are low, supplementing according to your child’s weight and age for 3 months may show significant improvement.

## Step 2: Try herbs and specialty nutrients

Once basic nutrients have been assessed, try some of the herbs and specialty nutrients outlined here, shown to be safe and well-tolerated. There may be some trial and error to find a good fit as no two children are the same.

## Step 3. Check the microbiome

Use a stool test and pediatric reference ranges to assess the gut microbiome. In some cases, microbial organic acids can also be helpful here.

## Step 4: Consider specialty testing

Testing for Genetics, Celiac, Neurotransmitter excretion, Toxins, and food sensitivities can refine your plan.



## TAKE-HOME FOR PARENTS

Does ADHD cause sleep problems? Or do sleep problems cause ADHD? Does it matter? It's a vicious cycle that keeps symptoms raging. Kids who have ADHD need quality sleep, so it's an area of priority in any ADHD plan.

Consistent sleep schedules, wind-down routines, reduced screen time before bed, and early daytime light exposure can help.

Short-term use of Melatonin may help shift circadian rhythms, and amino acids like 5HTP and GABA can also help kids wind down.

Structure around sleep is key for managing ADHD symptoms.

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## 3. SLEEP AND ADHD

Kids with ADHD get into a vicious cycle with sleep – poor sleep can worsen inattention, mood, and impulsivity, while ADHD can make it harder to fall and stay asleep.

Studies show that about 60% of adults with ADHD screen positive for at least one sleep disorder, while in kids, it can be as high as 84.8%.

About 37–42% of teens with ADHD report clinically significant daytime sleepiness, and early sleep problems predict later ADHD symptoms (and vice versa). Across the lifespan, individuals with ADHD are 6 to 16 times more likely to be diagnosed with a sleep disorder and 12 to 129 times more likely to be prescribed sleep medication than those without ADHD.

Common sleep challenges in kids with ADHD include:

- Delayed sleep onset
- Night wakings
- Insomnia
- Apnea
- Restless legs



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## 4. ELIMINATION DIETS & FOOD SENSITIVITIES IN ADHD

Studies tell us that about one-third of kids with ADHD improve with food elimination diets, though from my experience, I would say it's more like two-thirds when done well.

Anything can be a food trigger that makes things worse, but studies have found common trigger foods for ADHD symptoms to include:

- Gluten
- Dairy
- Soy
- Chocolate
- Eggs
- Corn
- Sugar
- Artificial dyes (e.g., Red 40) and preservatives like sodium benzoate (kids with a genetic predisposition to histamine problems may react more strongly to these).



## TAKE-HOME FOR PARENTS

ADHD kids may be more prone to food sensitivities, and that may be because they are also more prone to gut problems.

When tinkering with your child's diet, always start by adding IN more diversity of real, whole foods. This will automatically reduce the amount of dyes and added sugars that are not good for anyone, so start there for a simple and high-impact strategy.

From there, you can get more specific, starting with a 6-week gluten-free trial. I always recommend getting support if you're taking food categories out of your child's diet. Your child needs premium fuel, and you want to make sure they're still being well-nourished as you remove potential triggers.

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## TAKE-HOME FOR PARENTS

The gut is a key player in focus, mood, and behavior.

There can be imbalances in the gut even if there are no gut-specific symptoms like constipation or belly pain. A stool microbiome test and an age-specific interpretation can reveal underlying issues worth addressing.

## 6. ENVIRONMENTAL TOXINS, ALLERGIES & CONTAMINANTS

Accumulation of environmental toxins, even at low levels, can affect behavior and brain development, contributing to ADHD symptoms.

Major culprits include: Lead, Cadmium, Mercury, Pesticides, BPA. These sneak in through food, water, air, packaging, and contaminated environments, and contribute to inflammation, brain fog, poor focus, and poor memory.

Additionally, kids with environmental allergies have a 12-13% higher prevalence of ADHD compared to those without allergies. ADHD kids are also more likely to have asthma, allergic rhinitis, atopic dermatitis, and allergic conjunctivitis. The relationship appears to be bidirectional, with allergic conditions potentially increasing the risk of ADHD and vice versa.

Using an air purifier in the home, particularly in the bedroom, can dramatically reduce histamine load in allergic kids, potentially improving sleep and cognition in ADHD kids.

## 5. GUT HEALTH, PROBIOTICS, & THE ADHD MICROBIOME

We're continuing to learn more about how the gut-brain connection plays a role in ADHD.

Children with ADHD often have:

- Less microbial diversity
- Higher levels of Bacteroidetes, Clostridia, and Candida
- Lower levels of Faecalibacterium and Bifidobacterium
- More gut parasites (e.g., Giardia, Toxoplasma)
- Higher inflammation and Histamine-Producers in the gut
- More immune activation in the gut

All of this can interfere with nutrient absorption, mood, focus, cognition, proper elimination, and sleep, thus making ADHD symptoms worse.

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## 7. THE GENETICS BEHIND ADHD

About 70–80% of the risk for ADHD may be genetic, but the genetic risk for ADHD is polygenic, meaning many small gene variations stack up and impact function together.

The most recent genome-wide association study (GWAS) meta-analysis identified 76 potential risk genes, many of which are active during early brain development and in midbrain dopaminergic neurons.

Key ADHD-related genes include:

- DRD4, DRD5 – dopamine receptors
- DAT1, ADGRL3 (LPHN3) – dopamine signalling and transport
- HTR1B – serotonin signalling
- SNAP25 – neuronal communication
- SORCS3 – synaptic function and neurodevelopment
- FGF1 – early brain development
- SLC6A2 – norepinephrine transport
- KTN1 – brain structure

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### OTHER NOTABLE GENES

Variants in **methylation-related genes** like MTR and MTHFR might play a role in ADHD. Methylation imbalances might contribute to low serotonin and dopamine (affecting mood and impulsivity), high dopamine and adrenaline (contributing to panic, anxiety, poor concentration), low acetylcholine (contributing to poor memory and slower cognition), poor sleep (due to low melatonin), difficulty detoxifying harmful substances (causing irritability, brain fog, memory problems, poor sleep), high histamine (contributing to congestion, headaches, bowel issues, further sleep issues, rages, addiction, appetite changes).

**The COMT gene**, one of our key methylation-dependent genes that plays a key role in dopamine metabolism in the prefrontal cortex, has been studied as a potential genetic factor in ADHD, but no significant association has been made between COMT variants and overall ADHD risk. I find it's still helpful to know though, to better understand how your kids manage stress.

## 8. TECH CONCERNS AND ADHD

Screens mess with dopamine.

They bring a quick dopamine hit, and then leave your child with a deficit as they scream for more when it's taken away. They'll also interfere with circadian rhythm and sleep (and we already discussed why your child needs their sleep). Because of the dopamine issues in the ADHD brain, ADHD kids are more prone to addictions of all types - and phones and all things internet are designed for addiction.

With an ADHD-prone kid, keep a tight rein on the tech. "Check the tech" 1-2 hrs before bed, never allow computers and phones in bedrooms (in fact, consider turning off wi-fi at night!), have your child use blue-light blocking glasses and screen protectors to mitigate the impact on the eyes and brain. Watch for signs of tech addiction and nip it in the bud.

## 9. BEST TYPES OF EXERCISE FOR ADHD

Research consistently shows exercise as one of the most effective ways to manage ADHD symptoms.

Aim for about 30 minutes of any of the following per day, preferably outside:

- Aerobic exercise improves attention, focus, and working memory
- Closed-skill exercises (running, cycling) reduce hyperactivity
- Open-skill exercises (team sports, martial arts) improve executive function
- Outdoor activity adds a mood and regulation boost

Movement helps in another way, too. Movement-based Therapies like Masgutova Neurosensorimotor Reflex Integration, Rhythmic Movement Training, or Brain Gym can significantly help re-pattern how the brain works, sometimes dramatically reducing ADHD symptoms, along with the anxiety, picky eating, and sleep problems that often come alongside it.



# ACTION PLAN FOR PARENTS

If you're just starting with natural solutions for your ADHD child, here's what I'd suggest:

1. Shift to a Mediterranean-style, whole-food, gluten-free diet best you can.
2. Run labs (data brings clarity!):
  - Vitamin D, RBC magnesium, copper, RBC or plasma Zinc, Ferritin, and Omega-3 index give you a good baseline.
  - Add a stool test to assess the gut, add microbial organic acids if you suspect clostridia and candida
  - Consider adding genetics, Celiac, toxins, and food sensitivities to refine your plan.
3. Continue to replace food dyes, added sugars, and processed foods and prioritize variety, color, fibre, quality protein and healthy fats. Start with simple swaps that nourish the brain and keep blood sugar relatively stable.
4. Prioritize sleep and use melatonin and amino acids if needed to calm the nervous system.
5. Encourage daily movement, ideally outdoors.
6. Conduct a chemical audit of your home and filter your water and air.
7. Test for toxin load and deeper blood sugar irregularities if symptoms don't improve.
8. "Check The Tech" and keep a tight rein on screens.

If your child's ADHD is accompanied by other struggles like rage, anxiety, OCD, or PDA, you may need further refinements.

## About Jess Sherman

Jess is dedicated to offering families simple, natural tools for calmer behavior, steadier moods, and stronger learning, especially when kids struggle with anxiety, attention, or overwhelm. She is a Functional Diagnostic Nutrition® Practitioner, Board Certified in Functional Nutrition, and also holds a Master's Degree in Education. Her work helps families uncover the nutritional and biological roots of behavior so they can create calmer homes, feel more confident in their parenting, and support their children's health, learning, and emotional well-being.



*No part of this document should be considered medical advice nor should it take the place of medical advice.*

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