

# What Your Patients Aren't Telling You About ADHD Treatment

Exclusive survey of 11,000 caregivers and adults reveals that patients feel overwhelmed and unsupported as they work to achieve effective ADHD treatment without debilitating side effects using medication, supplements, parent training, CBT, exercise, and more.



SPECIAL REPORT

# 2024 Scorecard on ADHD Treatments

An exclusive survey of more than 11,000 *ADDitude* readers reveals the ADHD treatments they recommend most, common side effects, and barriers to quality care.

BY ANNI LAYNE RODGERS AND NICOLE C. KEAR

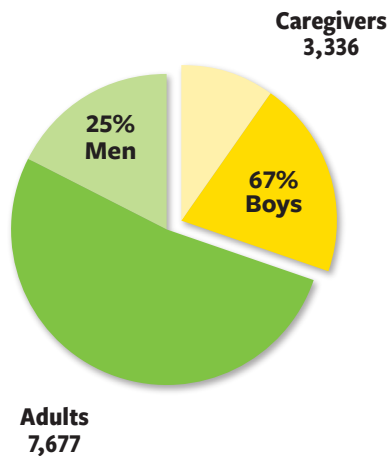


**A**DHD MEDICATION REMAINS A magnet for debate, confusion, and promise.

Amphetamine and methylphenidate have been used to treat ADHD for at least 80 years, and their safety and efficacy have been studied relentlessly. But according to a recent *ADDitude* survey, less than half (42%) of parents opt to medicate their children in the months after a diagnosis, largely due to the risk of side effects like appetite suppression or sleep disruption—both possible impediments to growth.

In the end, 85 percent of all people with ADHD end up taking  
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## Treatment Survey



## Medication Formulation, Duration & Satisfaction



**B**arely half of patients taking a long-acting medication are satisfied with its duration of coverage, which is 9.5 hours for children and 10 hours for adults, on average. This is a flunking grade, but it's far superior to the satisfaction ratings for short-acting formulations. So why do up to 23 percent of children and 30 percent of adults take short-acting stimulants? Perhaps because clinicians are more likely to prescribe them, and some adults like the medications' relative flexibility.

"Sometimes, in a social setting, I quite like taking only 5 mg of short-release (rather than my prescribed 10 mg)," wrote one survey respondent. "Other times, when working on something that I find really dull, I often take 15 mg (3 x 5 mg tablets)."

In the end, adults are more likely than children to take short-acting formulations, to be dissatisfied with their medications, and to be considering a switch.

## Top Impediments to Effective Treatment



### For Children

1. Access to treatment professionals with experience in ADHD
2. Side effects of ADHD medication
3. Long wait times for care



### For Adults

1. Access to treatment professionals with experience in ADHD
2. Access to diagnosing clinicians with experience in ADHD
3. Comorbid conditions

## Medication Side Effects

	Children Taking Medication			Adults Taking Medication		
	Amphetamine	Methylphenidate	Non-Stimulant	Amphetamine	Methylphenidate	Non-Stimulant
<b>Experienced Some Side Effects</b>	80%	83%	57%	78%	70%	66%
Appetite Suppression	61%	61%	17%	44%	35%	21%
Irritability or Moodiness	28%	28%	15%	24%	22%	13%
Sleep Problems	27%	24%	19%	24%	17%	19%
Dry Mouth	8%	5%	5%	42%	30%	33%
Dampened Personality	15%	16%	7%	9%	9%	10%
Tics	6%	9%	15%	4%	4%	2%
Headaches	14%	11%	9%	14%	17%	12%

Caregivers are likely to try fish oil, eliminate food dyes, and sign up for karate before considering a prescription for their child. Once they decide to try medication, caregivers prioritize finding the one with the fewest side effects.

At the same time, 53 percent of children who end up taking medication try methylphenidate, 36 percent take amphetamine, and just 11 percent take a non-stimulant. So given its popularity, methylphenidate must deliver the fewest side effects, right? No. According to caregiver reports, slightly more children reported side effects from methylphenidate than amphetamine, and those side effects were nearly identical, with appetite suppression being the most common by far; it impacted 61 percent

of children taking any stimulant.

Adults use amphetamine for what they cite as their top priority in choosing a medication—symptom control. Yet they gave it an efficacy rating that was only slightly better than methylphenidate, which is associated with fewer side effects.

So should more adults consider trying Concerta, Ritalin, or a newcomer like Azstarys? One-quarter to one-third of adults said they are now considering some kind of medication switch.



	Children Taking Medication			Adults Taking Medication		
	Amphetamine	Methylphenidate	Non-Stimulant	Amphetamine	Methylphenidate	Non-Stimulant
<b>Efficacy Rating (Out of 5)</b>	3.62	3.66	3.36	3.58	3.52	3.34
<b>Ever Used by</b>	36%	53%	11%	64%	28%	8%
<b>Long-Acting Formulation</b>	80%	77%	87%	70%	70%	82%
<b>Satisfied with Duration</b>	55%	59%	57%	52%	52%	64%
<b>Short-Acting Formulation</b>	20%	23%	13%	30%	30%	18%
<b>Satisfied with Duration</b>	49%	53%	40%	39%	42%	36%
<b>Considering a Med Switch</b>	15%	22%	18%	24%	29%	35%

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medication and they rate its efficacy higher than any other treatment included in the survey, *ADDitude's* largest to date. More than 11,000 adults with ADHD and caregivers of children with the condition participated in the survey.

“We hesitated for a long time and tried diet changes first in an attempt to avoid medication,” said one respondent. “Although diet is very important, medication has given our child the opportunity to enjoy life by having more emotional control,

better friendships, and the ability to complete work and think things through. Greater self-confidence flows from all of this.”

To be clear, medication is not a quick fix. On average, children try 2.75 different medications and adults try 2.56 prescriptions before finding one that works for them. Even still, survey respondents said that 17 percent of children and 14 percent of adults cease treatment with medication for one reason or another—cessation rates lower than reported in other studies.

Access to treatment professionals with experience in ADHD

## What Readers Say vs. What They Do

The most highly recommended ADHD treatment (exercise) has been used by less than half of *ADDitude* survey respondents. The second most recommended treatment among adults (ADHD coaching) has been adopted by only 17 percent of people. And the vitamins, minerals, and supplements used by 49 percent of people don't even earn a passing grade. All of this hints at problems with availability, cost, and medical advice in the world of ADHD treatment.

Treatment	Caregivers		Adults	
	Ever Used By	Users Who Recommend	Ever Used By	Users Who Recommend
Exercise	40%	94%	50%	95%
Parent Training or Behavioral Therapy	57%	93%	—	—
Medication	85%	82%	84%	91%
ADHD Coaching	13%	82%	17%	93%
Psychotherapy or Counseling	69%	81%	74%	92%
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	34%	79%	46%	81%
Mindfulness	30%	76%	59%	89%
Diet & Nutrition	30%	73%	29%	84%
Neurofeedback	14%	69%	9%	81%
Vitamins, Minerals, Supplements	49%	55%	49%	66%
Brain Training	6%	52%	6%	64%

### ☑ Diet & Nutrition

#### What dietary changes move the needle?

At least half of caregivers and adults agree that the following improve ADHD symptoms:

- Decreasing or eliminating artificial colors/preservatives/sweeteners
- Decreasing or eliminating sugar
- Increasing protein



Research supports these observations and reader efficacy ratings are high. So why are fewer than 30 percent of caregivers and adults making dietary changes to address ADHD? For one, 61 percent of children using stimulant medication to treat their ADHD experience appetite suppression as a side effect, according to their caregivers. Dietitians generally advise that children should focus on eating first and eating healthy second.

“We struggle to get enough calories into our child due to decreased appetite,” wrote one parent. “We are happy to have her eat, regardless of what or when, to keep energy levels up.”

### ☑ Psychotherapy More Prevalent Than Coaching

#### Goals differ for one-on-one sessions

Though the recommendation rates are nearly identical, far more people engage in psychotherapy than work with an ADHD coach. Therapy generally helps clients work through comorbid conditions like anxiety and depression, and negative beliefs or self-defeating behaviors. Coaching helps to strengthen

skills to mitigate ADHD deficits and reach goals, but its benefits are short-lived, readers say.

“ADHD coaching helped me to narrow down my biggest challenges and work on practical solutions for the day-to-day things I struggle with,” said one survey respondent.



is the biggest impediment to effective treatment, according to both caregivers and adults. Other barriers include side effects, long wait times, poor access to diagnosing clinicians, and comorbid conditions that complicate evaluation and treatment (82% of children and 92% of adults with ADHD report comorbid diagnoses).

The average age of ADHD diagnosis in children is 8 for boys and 9 for girls, according to survey respondents. On average, adults not diagnosed as children learn of their ADHD around age 39. Most of these late diagnoses are among women, who

### ☑ Parent Training or Behavioral Therapy

**This first-line treatment is used by less than 6 out of 10**

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends parent training in behavior management as a first-line ADHD treatment for children diagnosed before age 7, and a complementary treatment thereafter. Despite this recommendation, and a high rate of reported satisfaction, just more than half of parents say they've ever used it. Possible reasons for this: Clinicians aren't recommending parent training nearly enough; behavioral therapists versed in ADHD are difficult to find; and/or therapy is expensive and time-consuming. Likely, all of these reasons are true.

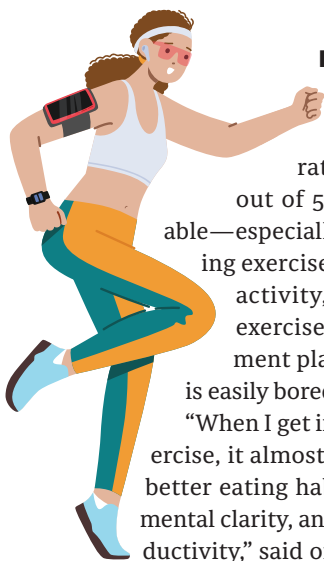
"Changing the way we parented was a game changer," wrote one survey respondent. "It brought the stress in the house down significantly and meant we could focus on the lagging skills and promoting the behaviors we wanted to see versus punishing behaviors we didn't want to see."



### ☑ Exercise Invaluable and infrequent

Does exercise eradicate ADHD symptoms? Hardly. Readers rated its efficacy on ADHD just 2.4 out of 5, but they also called it invaluable—especially vigorous cardiovascular morning exercise. It aids sleep, mood, and hyperactivity, our readers say. So why isn't exercise a universal component of treatment plans? As we know, the ADHD brain is easily bored and resists routine.

"When I get into a good stride with routine exercise, it almost always goes hand-in-hand with better eating habits, better focus, energy levels, mental clarity, and stronger relationships and productivity," said one adult with ADHD. "Exercise is undoubtedly a crucial piece of the (treatment) puzzle."



report years of struggle preceding their diagnosis.

"I wish I had been diagnosed and treated sooner," wrote one survey respondent. "The struggle is so profound and deep. And the longer you go through it without help or knowing what you're really struggling with, the harder it feels to get others to hear and see you. You feel alone."

Comorbid Condition	Reported Prevalence in Children	Reported Prevalence in Adults
Anxiety	55%	71%
Depression	21%	61%
Learning Disorder	21%	10%
Autism	17%	9%
Sensory Processing Disorder	16%	10%
PTSD or cPTSD	4%	21%
Migraine	5%	20%
Sleep Disorder	9%	19%

Persistence, flexibility, and self-advocacy are vitally important when working to find the right medication. Though the trial-and-error phase was described as frustrating by most survey respondents, research tells us the benefits of ADHD medication use—reduced risks of automobile accidents, substance abuse, unwanted pregnancy, and self-harm in teens—are worthwhile and meaningful.

"I wish I had known that ADHD medication helps prevent addictions to dangerous substances," wrote one survey respondent, "and car accidents for people with ADHD." **A**

### The Most Impairing Symptoms of ADHD

ADHD Impairment	Children Impacted	Adults Impacted
Distractibility/Inattention	82%	89%
Time management challenges	64%	81%
Disorganization	63%	76%
Emotional dysregulation	69%	70%
Executive dysfunction	51%	62%
Impulsivity	65%	56%
Sleep disturbances	38%	46%
Social skills challenges	52%	39%
Hyperactivity	41%	22%
Behavior challenges	47%	21%

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## Most Popular ADHD Medications Used Today

Ritalin is the most common first prescription given to children (26%), followed by Concerta (21%), Adderall (21%), and Vyvanse (11%). Though a quarter of children start out on Ritalin, only 11% take it currently.

Medication	% of Patients Currently Using It		Users' Ratings for Efficacy on ADHD Symptoms (1 to 5)	
	Children	Adults	Children	Adults
<b>Methylphenidate</b>				
Concerta	19.72%	12.42%	3.09	2.96
Ritalin	11.34%	9.68%	3.03	2.94
Focalin XR	7.72%	1.73%	3.13	2.69
Ritalin LA	4.66%	3%	3.05	2.97
Focalin	4%	.78%	3.13	2.63
Metadate	1.36%	.52%	2.97	2.84
Jornay PM	1.93%	.25%	3.38	2.67
Azstarys	1.18%	.31%	3.41	2.63
<b>Amphetamine</b>				
Vyvanse	16.52%	26.48%	3.06	3.31
Adderall XR	8.75%	15.21%	3.06	3.35
Adderall	7.67%	17.87%	2.97	3.38
Dexedrine	1.41%	3.37%	2.77	3.2
<b>Nonstimulant</b>				
Intuniv	9.79%	1.91%	2.79	2.52
Strattera	4.34%	6.2%	2.28	2.31
Qelbree	1.46%	.34%	2.28	2.07

## ADHD Treatment Benefits and Barriers

Treatment	How effective is this as a treatment for ADHD? (0 to 5 scale)		Share your experience with this treatment...	
	Caregivers	Adults	Benefits	Barriers
Exercise	2.37	2.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved sleep</li> <li>Better focus</li> <li>Elevated mood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Team sports challenge social skills</li> <li>Consistency is hard to achieve</li> <li>Solo exercise is boring</li> </ul>
Parent Training or Behavioral Therapy	2.81		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved parent-child relationship</li> <li>Better ADHD understanding</li> <li>Realize full benefit of ADHD medication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expensive</li> <li>Time consuming</li> <li>Child resistance</li> </ul>
Medication	3.57	3.52	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Symptom management with medication makes other therapies possible</li> <li>Promotes better focus, less distractibility, and greater productivity</li> <li>Reduces anxiety, depression, self-medication when ADHD symptoms are managed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Medication stigma &amp; misinformation are deterrents</li> <li>Trial-and-error frustration is high</li> <li>Side effects (namely appetite suppression, sleep disruption) push patients off meds</li> <li>Availability still a big problem</li> <li>Difficulty finding HCPs who know adult ADHD</li> </ul>
ADHD Coaching	2.83	2.51	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practical application of day-to-day skills</li> <li>Alleviates pressure on parents</li> <li>Provides accountability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expensive</li> <li>Results are short-lived</li> </ul>
Psychotherapy or Counseling	2.77	2.48	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Safe space away from judgment</li> <li>Addresses shame and self-esteem problems caused by ADHD</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficult to find a provider who knows ADHD &amp; comorbidities</li> <li>May do more harm than good if not ADHD-informed</li> </ul>
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	2.88	2.91	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helps emotional dysregulation &amp; RSD</li> <li>Aids self-understanding</li> <li>Improves self-esteem &amp; anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ADHD impulsivity may sabotage</li> <li>Child resistance</li> <li>CBT does not address daily challenges or benefit executive functions</li> </ul>
Mindfulness	2.99	2.76	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stops spiraling thoughts, emotional dysregulation, RSD</li> <li>Promotes sleep</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May trigger frustration, sense of failure</li> <li>Difficult to remember, and practice is key</li> </ul>
Diet & Nutrition	2.99	2.9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improves mood and energy</li> <li>Reduces hyperactivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Source of frustration for picky eaters</li> <li>Healthy food is more pricey</li> <li>Meal planning requires executive function</li> </ul>
Neurofeedback	2.97	2.88	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helps with focus and clear thinking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expensive</li> <li>Time consuming</li> <li>Results are short-lived</li> </ul>
Vitamins, Minerals, Supplements	3.37	3.28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can help bridge medication gaps, soften medication crashes</li> <li>Supports overall health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficult to gauge efficacy</li> <li>One more thing to nag about</li> </ul>
Brain Training	3.48	3.25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improves focus and work performance</li> <li>Help with emotional regulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Benefits of brain training games don't translate to real life</li> <li>Child resistance</li> <li>Expensive</li> </ul>