Fish oil for concentration in ADHD

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There seems to be a groundswell in the use of fish oil in children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to improve concentration. Are there systematic reviews that support this practice?

EVIDENCE FOR EFFICACY: A search for fish oil and ADHD appears in two citations in the Cochrane Register of Controlled Trials (Central). One is in the adult population and includes olive and flax oil. The focus of this study is on raising levels of fish oil in the body, based on an assumption that fish oil is positively correlated with neuropsychiatric health. The second is a placebo-controlled double-blind trial in children with ADHD (N=40). This study is interesting in that the intake was through foods rich in fish oil, rather than a prescribed dose/number of capsules. Attention deficit, hyperactivity and impulsivity; aggression; visual perception; development of visual-motor integration; impatience did not significantly differ between groups. The authors conclude that intake of fish oil-rich foods did not improve ADHD-related symptoms. Although treatment of ADHD with fatty acids deserves further investigation, careful attention should be paid to which fatty acid(s) is used.

There are no Cochrane Reviews on this topic. However, a systematic review published in 2011 by Bloch and Qawasmi summarises the evidence for the potential benefits and possible harms of well-known herbal medicines.
Summary Message

The literature is sparse with regard to the use of fish oil for improved concentration in ADHD. Some studies are further complicated by the use of a combination of fatty acids. One systematic review of 10 trials suggests a modest benefit in ADHD relative to other pharmacological agents. Given the benign safety profile, supplementation with standard pharmacotherapies may be a reasonable suggestion for some families. The caveat here is that more studies are required to make a recommendation for universal administration to all children with ADHD.

Key references


HealthPost (product information) [cited 2013 May 7]. Available from: www.healthpost.co.nz.
