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Are there safe medications for my son's attention deficit hyperactivity disorder?

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurobehavioral condition, not just a case of a child willfully acting out. The disorder, which is highly treatable, has three core symptoms: inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsivity. A child can have one symptom or a combination of one or more symptoms.

Ignoring ADHD can impair a child's life. Children with untreated ADHD tend to do worse in school, often don't finish high school and have difficulties finding stable lives. The disorder has been recognized for more than 70 years and is one of the most closely studied medical conditions. Equally well-studied are the medications for treating it.

Today there is a range of medications that can be used, and each works differently. Every child has a unique set of symptoms and therefore requires treatment specific to the symptoms to achieve the best response. Finding the right medication may take four to six weeks. But in the end, 90 percent of those with ADHD can be successfully treated with medications that don't cause side effects — and that will improve their quality of life.

Why doesn't my doctor give me antibiotics when I have a cold?

It's important to recognize that most upper respiratory infections — that is, colds — are caused by viruses, not bacteria. Antibiotics are designed to work against bacterial infections, but are not effective against viral infections.

Unfortunately, the old saying is correct: nobody has ever found a cure for the common cold. In eight out of 10 cases, the best things we can do are use over-the-counter medications to manage the symptoms (congestion, sore throat and cough), ride it out and try to avoid spreading the cold to others.

Viruses are mostly transmitted in secretions from the upper respiratory tract. Cold viruses are spread when you cough or sneeze on others or when you touch objects when virus secretions are on your hands. Viruses can remain alive on objects like door knobs (and hands) for several hours. To prevent spreading them, sneeze away from other people or into your elbow. Using alcohol-based sanitizers or washing your hands with hot water and soap for at least 15 seconds can help kill viruses that you might spread or, for that matter, pick up.

Is it true that chocolate could be making my gastroesophageal reflux worse?

Gastroesophageal reflux is a problem in which acid from the stomach flows back into your esophagus and irritates its lining, often causing the discomfort of "heartburn" and other symptoms like chest pain, hoarseness and difficulty swallowing. Everybody experiences heartburn occasionally, but when it causes symptoms at least twice a week, it's considered gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD.

And, yes, it's true that chocolate can intensify this tendency. Chocolate contains a substance called methylxanthine that relaxes the smooth muscle tissues in the lower esophageal sphincter, which allows increased backflow of acid. Peppermint, caffeine, alcohol and nicotine have the same effect.

An obvious solution is to consume less of the offending substances, along with maintaining a healthy weight and other lifestyle measures. Treatment options include over-the-counter medications, such as antacids, H-2 receptor blockers and proton-pump inhibitors. Your doctor may suggest a referral to a gastroenterologist, who can examine the inside of your esophagus with a fiberoptic instrument to look for abnormalities. They include Barrett's esophagus, a precancerous condition sometimes associated with GERD.