

Pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions for non-respiratory sleep disturbance in children with neurodisabilities: a systematic review

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Sleep problems such as difficulty settling at bedtime or night waking are more common and serious in children with disorders of development of the brain, for example autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and learning difficulties. Sleep problems can affect children's and parents' mental, physical and emotional well-being, and, so, help with children's sleep is a main concern for parents. There is a wide range of drug and non-drug treatments available to manage sleep disturbance. However, very little is known about whether or not these treatments make a difference; in other words, are these treatments effective?

This study aimed to investigate this gap in knowledge. We reviewed previous research to find out what is already known about the effectiveness of drug and non-drug treatments. Study results suggest that one drug (melatonin) may be helpful for managing children's sleep. However, we cannot tell how beneficial it is. There are also many non-drug treatments (e.g. information leaflets, parent training groups, one-to-one work between a parent and a professional). However, the studies evaluating these sorts of help tested different treatments in different ways. This means that we cannot tell how beneficial each treatment is. A limited number of studies also looked at families' or professionals' views and experiences of these treatments.

Overall, research on treatments of sleep disturbance in children is limited, with only one drug (melatonin) showing signs of benefit. Owing to the limited number of studies available and the largely poor quality of this research, it is not possible to make any suggestions for clinical practice. More research is needed to identify the best treatments for sleep problems among children with neurodisabilities.

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