

Community Paediatrics Service

Information for parents and carers about using melatonin for sleep disorders



What is melatonin and why is it important?

Melatonin is a hormone which is produced in the brain and is released by the body during the hours of darkness.

Melatonin is important because it helps us to regulate our sleep pattern.

Good sleep can help:

- Physical health
- Mood
- Behaviour
- Development.

How can melatonin medication help my child?

Childhood sleeping problems are common and can be particularly problematic for children who have neurodevelopmental problems, such as:

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Learning difficulties
- Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD).

This is probably because children with these conditions can have difficulty recognising appropriate sleep-wake cycles.

A number of studies have found that giving melatonin as a medicine, for short periods of time, can have beneficial effects regulating a child's sleep pattern.

How does melatonin medicine work?

The modified tablets release melatonin slowly throughout the night when swallowed whole. This works for getting to sleep and also (but to a lesser extent) staying asleep.

Melatonin is normally prescribed as modified release tablets. This may be as the generic form of melatonin or a branded product such as Adaflex® or Slenyto® depending on your child's requirements. The dose will be shown on the medicine label.

All treatment options will be discussed with you by the specialist nurse or paediatrician so that a joint decision can be made about the medication that is suitable for your child.

How much melatonin medicine should I give my child?

Your child's paediatrician or specialist nurse will advise you about the starting dose to be given. They will usually recommend your child starts at a two-milligram dose. It may take time to find the right dose that works for your child.

If there is no improvement in your child's sleep after three nights, then the dose can be increased in accordance with instructions from the specialist nurse or paediatrician. It may be increased again if there is still no improvement. It is important to follow the instructions given to you by the paediatrician or specialist nurse.

Please do **not** increase the dose to any more than six milligrams; contact the department for advice.

Your specialist nurse or paediatrician will review whether the melatonin is still required after three to six months.

We advise that the melatonin (at whatever dose) is stopped for 1-2 weeks every six months to allow a "wash out" but also to see if it is still required, as often the child's own 'circadian rhythm' (sleep/wake pattern) will have taken over. If it is required, please start back on two milligrams and only increase to previous dose if needed.

When should I give the melatonin medicine?

You should give the melatonin medicine around the same time each evening, so it becomes part of your child's daily routine.

Melatonin tablets are normally swallowed whole with a beaker of water half an hour to an hour before your child's bedtime.

Can I crush the melatonin tablets?

Only crush melatonin tablets on the advice of the paediatrician or specialist nurse.

The tablets should be crushed into a powder using a tablet crusher.

Tablet crushers are free at the child development centre or can be bought at your local community pharmacy.

You can then add the crushed tablet to foods such as yoghurt and spreads or mix in cold liquids, such as water.

What if I forget to give melatonin medicine before bedtime?

If you miss giving your child their melatonin medicine before bedtime and they are already asleep, wait until the next day and then give your child their normal dose as usual.

If your child is still awake, give them their normal dose.

Can anyone else use this melatonin medicine?

No, you must only give this melatonin medicine to the child who it has been prescribed for.

You must **never** give this medicine to anyone else even if their condition appears to be the same, as this could cause harm.

Are there any side effects?

We use medicines to make our children feel better but occasionally they can cause side effects.

Rarely, melatonin can cause problems with your child's heart rate. You must contact your child's general practitioner (GP) immediately if they have chest pain or a fast heart rate or reduced body temperature.

An increase in seizures has been reported in some children with epilepsy.

Some children experience headaches, dizziness and irritability. A headache can be treated with the child's usual pain medication – please follow the dosage instructions on the medication.

Itching has also been reported, this can be treated by applying a moisturising cream or anti-itch cream.

You should contact your child's GP if your child seems unwell or you are concerned about any of these side effects.

How do I store melatonin medicine?

- You must store the melatonin tablets in a safe place, out of children's reach.
- Keep the melatonin tablets at room temperature, away from bright light or direct sun light.
- Keep the melatonin tablets away from heat.

If your child stops taking the melatonin tablets, please return them to your pharmacist.

How do I order my child's melatonin medication?

The paediatrician who first prescribed the medication will tell you how to order your child's repeat melatonin prescriptions.

Prescriptions can now be sent electronically to your nominated pharmacy.

Please allow at least seven working days before you require the prescription; this is to ensure you do not run out of the medicine.

When your child is stabilised on a suitable dose, the paediatrician or specialist nurse may ask your child's GP to prescribe the melatonin medicine.

Has melatonin medicine been approved to treat sleep disorders?

Modified release melatonin tablets are licenced for use in adults for insomnia and have been successfully used for many years 'off-label' in children. This means that whilst the manufacturer has not specified it can be used to treat sleep disorders in children, it is recommended by all the specialists across Cheshire & Merseyside and the local prescribing guidelines.

There are many clinical situations, when medicines are used outside the terms of the licence (i.e., 'off-label') as it is judged by the prescriber to be in the best interest of the patient on the basis of available evidence. Such situations are particularly common in certain areas of medicine, for instance, in paediatrics where difficulties in the development of age-appropriate formulations means that many medicines used in children are used 'off-label' (or are unlicensed).

Contact information

If you require further information please contact one of the following community paediatric teams:

Halton - telephone number: 0151 4955400

Warrington - telephone number: 01925 946480

For impartial and confidential advice or information on the services provided by Bridgewater or to receive this leaflet in an alternative format call our Patient Services team on 0800 587 0562.