Caring for Your Child
Stimulant Medications

What are stimulants?

Stimulants are the medicines most often used to treat ADHD. They stimulate parts of the brain that help to increase attention span and decrease impulsiveness. They also stimulate the parts of the brain that help to keep you awake and the parts of the brain that make you feel like you have had enough to eat. Two of the most common side effects are difficulty falling asleep and decreased appetite.

Stimulants used to treat ADHD:

- **Dexmethylphenidate**
  *Brand Names:*
  - Focalin, Focalin XR

- **Dextroamphetamine**
  *Brand Names:*
  - Dexedrine, Dexedrine Spansules
  - ProCentra
  - Zenzedi

- **Lisdexamfetamine**
  *Brand Name: Vyvanse*

- **Methylphenidate**
  *Brand Names:*
  - Concerta
  - Daytrana
  - Metadate, Metadate CD
  - Methylin
  - Quillavent XR
  - Ritalin, Ritalin LA, Ritalin SR

- **Mixed Salts of Amphetamine**
  *Brand Names:*
  - Adderall, Adderall XR
All of the stimulants listed above are effective in the treatment of ADHD. The medications vary in how long they work, from 4 to 12 hours per day. There is not one stimulant medication that is better than another for children with ADHD. If a child does not do well on one stimulant he may still respond well to another stimulant.

**How can stimulants help?**

Stimulants can help children to pay attention. Often they find it easier to complete work and the work is more accurate. Children on stimulants are less fidgety and less active when they should be still. Children on stimulants are more likely to “think before they act” which may help to decrease “acting out” behaviors and aggression. Sometimes handwriting is more clear. Stimulant medication alone may not treat all of the problems that go along with ADHD. Stimulants do not make children want to do things that they don’t like doing. Stimulants may not help with math or reading if your child has a difficulty learning these skills. Many children with ADHD also need help with learning and many families of children with ADHD also need behavioral family therapy.

**What side effects do stimulants have?**

The list below includes common side effects. These side effects are often mild and may decrease if the dose is lowered or during the first few weeks on the medication:

- Decreased appetite (especially at lunch). Be sure your child eats a good breakfast and encourage him to eat something at lunch even if he does not feel hungry.
- Trouble falling asleep
- Headaches
- Stomachaches

**Less common side effects:** (rare side effects are not included in this list):

- Irritability, emotional sensitivity may occur on the medication or as the medication wears off (Noting the time of day this symptom occurs will be helpful to your child’s physician)
- Increased activity as the medication wears off
- Nervous habits like skin picking or nervous tics like eye blinking or throat clearing (occasionally tics do not stop when the medication is stopped)
- Increased heart rate or blood pressure
- Being withdrawn or sad when on the medication
- Decreased growth rate
- Blurred vision or eyesight changes

Any behavior that is very unusual for your child could be a medication side effect and should be discussed with your physician.
Warnings about Stimulants

Children with heart disease may be at increased risk of fatal irregular heart rhythms on stimulant medications. If your child has a heart disease you should discuss the risks of the medication with his heart doctor before starting the medication. If your child has had fainting spells, chest pain with exercise, feelings of an irregular heart beat or heart rate, seizures, or rheumatic fever you should discuss these with the doctor before starting medication. If there is a history of sudden unexplained death in a family member under age 50, or if a family member has heart disease, you should discuss this with the doctor.

Very rarely painful and long lasting erections have occurred with some stimulants. If this occurs, immediately notify your doctor.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How long does it take to find the right medication and dose?

A: Finding the right medicine and dose for your child may take several weeks. Your child’s doctor will ask you questions or ask you to fill out a checklist about your child’s behavior on different doses of medicine. Your child’s doctor might also ask for information from your child’s teacher.

Q: Is it safe to stop the medication?

A: If your child has been on a high dose of the medication for a long time, tell your child’s doctor before stopping the medication. Otherwise, you can stop these medications. When you stop the medication, your child’s behavior will rapidly return to what it was like before taking the medication.

Q: Should medication be taken only when my child goes to school?

A: This is something to discuss with your child’s doctor. Some children may not take the medication on weekends or over the summer, but if children take medication outside of school, it might help them get along with siblings and friends or pay attention during homework or other activities.

Q: Are there medications my child should not take when on stimulants?

A: It is best to discuss specific medications with your child’s doctor. If you want to give an over-the-counter nasal decongestant that is taken by mouth, your child should not take the stimulant at the same time without discussing this with your child’s doctor.
Q: Do stimulants cause drug abuse?

A: Stimulants can be abused. For this reason there are limits on how much medicine the doctor can prescribe at one time (they are controlled substances). However, research suggests that treatment of children with ADHD with stimulants does not cause drug abuse and actually may decrease the risk of drug abuse.

Q: How long will my child need the medicine?

A: Some children are treated for a few years and others continue to need the medication even as adults. There is no way to predict how long your child will need the medication.