

ADHD INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

Frequently Asked Questions About Stimulant Medications

Ritalin, Adderall, and Dexedrine



What are stimulant medications?

Stimulant medications can be useful for ADHD because they appear to stimulate parts of the brain which may not be working as well in children with ADHD. These three stimulants are among the most useful for managing ADHD:

- *Ritalin* (methylphenidate)
- *Adderall* (a combination of amphetamine salts)
- *Dexedrine* (dextroamphetamine)

How do these medications help children with ADHD?

These medicines improve the most common problems related to ADHD. They help increase attention span, make children less likely to become distracted, and allow children to finish school work and chores more easily. They can also help children to think before acting, decrease restlessness and fidgeting, and in some children, lessen aggression. Though not all children with ADHD do well with stimulant medications, most children do benefit from at least one of them.

How long do the effects of the medicines last?

There are different forms of each of the 3 kinds of medication. Different forms last different lengths of time. Some of the medications last 4 hours, some 6-8 hours and some for 8-12 hours. Your doctor will talk with you about the specifics of your child's prescribed medications.

Are these medicines addicting?

Many parents are concerned that stimulant medicines might become addicting. While they are chemically similar to addictive drugs such as speed and cocaine, these medications are not habit forming. When taken as prescribed, addiction has not been a problem with any of the ADHD stimulant medications.

What side effects do these medicines have?

Any medication may have side effects, including an allergy to the medicine. Here is a list of potential side effects, ranging from those that happen more often, to those that occur rarely.

Common Side Effects

Decreased appetite

This is a common problem that usually occurs at lunch when the medication is most active. Appetite tends to improve by dinner. Breakfast is rarely affected because the effects of the medication will have worn off by then. If possible, give your child a good breakfast. Children will often lose weight at the beginning of treatment, but this usually stops after several months.

Sleep problems

Although this side effect is common, it is more likely to occur if your child takes an after-school dose of medicine. Sleep may improve over time, but if it doesn't, discuss ways to improve sleep with your child's doctor.

Abdominal pain and headaches

Abdominal pain and headaches are temporary problems which usually improve within 2 to 3 weeks. Sometimes, either one may persist. If your child has continuing problems with either abdominal pain or headaches, talk with your child's doctor.

Occasional/Rare Side Effects

Emotional changes

Some children become moody or depressed on medication. They may also get sleepy, "spacey," or overly focused. Also, some children get irritable when the medication wears off. If any of these side effects are severe or last a long time, the medication might be decreased or, in some cases, changed.

Rise in blood pressure and pulse

The medication may cause an increase in blood pressure and pulse depending on the dosage. These side effects are usually minor. Your child's doctor will check your child's blood pressure and pulse during medication appointments.

Tics

Tics are muscle twitches. Stimulants may cause tics. If the tic is mild, the medication can usually be continued. If a severe tic develops, your child's doctor will likely recommend changing medicines.

Effects on growth

There have been studies suggesting that long-term medication therapy can slow growth by a small amount over the first 2 years of treatment. However, even those children whose growth slows down may well catch up during their teenage years. If you are concerned about your child's growth, be sure to discuss it with your child's doctor.

Serious heart problems

Very rarely, chest pain, palpitation, or trouble breathing can occur. This is more likely if your child has a previous heart condition, so be sure to discuss this risk with your child's doctor.

Other resources

- If you would like more information about ADHD treatments, visit your pediatrician's Home Page at kp.org/mydoctor, or check out one of the recommended Web sites below.
- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

Web sites

- National Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA): add.org
- Children with Attention Deficit Disorders (CHADD): chadd.org

Books

- *All About Attention Deficit Disorder*, by Thomas Phelan, 2003.
- *Straight Talk about Psychiatric Medications for Kids*, by Timothy Wilens, 2004.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your child's physician or other health care professional. If your child has persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your child's doctor. If you have questions or need additional information about your child's medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.