

Stimulant medication for

6

ADHD & Hyperkinetic disorder

Factsheet for parents and teachers

What are stimulant medications?

They are medications that affect the action of certain chemicals in the brain. In adults, they have the effect of making people more alert, active and awake. This is why they are called stimulants. In children, they can increase attention and reduce hyperactivity, and are used as one part of the treatment for hyperkinetic disorder and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (see Factsheet 5 on ADHD and hyperkinetic disorder).

When is medication used?

Medication should be prescribed only after your child has been fully assessed by a specialist. Stimulant medications may be worth trying if your child has serious difficulties with:

- concentration – can't concentrate for very long, doesn't seem to listen, is forgetful, disorganised, takes ages to start things and then rarely finishes them, is easily distracted
- activity levels – is overactive, climbs on things all the time, talks all the time, is very loud and noisy
- impulsivity – can't wait for things, interrupts a lot, acts without thinking. They may have big problems:
- at school – poor concentration, can't complete a task, disruptive in class
- at home – on the go all the time, can't follow instructions, poor concentration, forgetful
- with friends – difficulty taking turns or sharing, getting into fights.

<http://www.trippin.co.nz>

How stimulant medication works

Stimulants seem to affect parts of the brain that allow us to control how we pay attention and organise our behaviour.

What are its effects?

The child's behaviour becomes calmer, more focused and less impulsive. However, medication does not work for everyone. It is also important that the child has adequate help with learning in the classroom, and with controlling behaviour (see Factsheet 5 on ADHD and hyperkinetic disorder).

Why does medication help?

Stimulant medication creates a 'window of opportunity' when children can be focused and concentrate better. They can therefore learn better at school. Some children say that when they are taking the medication, they can think more clearly, and find it easier to understand requests from parents and teachers. School work becomes more interesting and enjoyable, and they make more friends.

Parents and teachers can do a lot to help a child to make these changes. Your understanding and support (practical and emotional) are crucial. Practical and effective ways of helping a child to improve behaviour include:

- praising good behaviour
- making clear simple requests – one at a time
- praise for effort as well as achievement
- rewards for good behaviour
- brief periods of time away from other people when their behaviour becomes too much.

Which stimulant medications are used?

The stimulant medication most commonly used is *methylphenidate*. When it works, the effect begins within 30–60 minutes. The exact amount of each dose needs to be carefully monitored and adjusted by a specialist. There are also long-acting forms that last up to 12 hours.

Dexamphetamine is a stimulant that is chemically very similar to methylphenidate. It sometimes works when methylphenidate does not.

What are the side-effects?

As with any effective treatment, there might be side-effects, such as reduced appetite and staying awake later than usual. Side-effects are less likely if the dose is increased gradually when the tablets are started. Some parents worry about addiction, but there is no good evidence to suggest that this is a problem.

The most common side-effects are:

- reduced appetite
- staying awake later.

Because of the effect on appetite, the child's height and weight should be measured regularly. Giving medication with meals may help.

Less common side-effects to look out for include:

- being 'over-focused', quiet and staring – this may be a sign that the dose is too high
- anxiety, nervousness, irritability or tearfulness
- tummy pains or feeling sick
- headache, dizziness or drowsiness
- tics or twitches.

How long should the medication continue?

Medication may need to be continued for several years. Some children will be able to stop completely as teenagers, others may be able to stop even sooner. Some may still need medication as adults. There are no known harmful effects from using these medications over several years.

Treatment will be monitored by a specialist and will be reviewed regularly. Medication may need to be adjusted. Physical health checks and repeat prescriptions may be provided by your general practitioner.

Non-stimulant medication

If stimulants don't work, your specialist may suggest one of a number of alternatives, such as imipramine or clonidine.

ACKNOWLEDGE:

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