



ADHD Basic Facts: What Every Parent Should Know Before Starting a Child on Medication



General Information

Studies have shown that medication is effective in treating the symptoms of ADHD alone or in combination with behavioral interventions. There are several types of medications, and they are grouped into 2 major categories: stimulants and non-stimulant medications. Most children are initially treated with stimulants, although there are reasons why your doctor may choose to treat your child with a non-stimulant. Deciding which medication is right for your child may take time. Your doctor may try several different doses or switch to different medications to find the best choice. Discuss any family history of heart disease, high blood pressure, or substance use with your doctor.

Stimulant medications usually work within 15 to 90 minutes, depending on dose and formulation. Stimulant medications come in short-acting preparations that need to be given 2 or 3 times per day and long-acting preparations that are given only once a day. Although the medications are similar, each child may experience different benefits and side effects with different medications.

Stimulant medications should be given at the same time of the day, and you should never give 2 doses at the same time to make up for a missed dose. Non-stimulant medications may take up to 2 or 3 weeks before a beneficial effect is seen.

Side Effects

There are several side effects that can be associated with stimulant medications. These include stomachache, headache, decreased appetite, sleep problems, and increased symptoms as the medication wears off (known as rebound). Preschool children may also experience emotional outbursts, repetitive behaviors or thoughts, or irritability. Usually these effects are mild and often decrease after the first 1 to 2 weeks. Your doctor will adjust medications or discuss other strategies at follow-up visits if these side effects continue. It is helpful to observe the time of day when side effects occur. Serious side effects are rare, but you should contact your doctor's office if your child experiences dizziness, fainting, severe irritability, tics, or serious behavioral changes.

Follow-up

Currently, there is no way to know which medication will be best for any particular child. To make sure that your child is receiving the dosage that gives the best effect with the least amount of side effects, your doctor will need to start at a low dose and increase the dose until a good effect or fewer side effects are seen. To judge whether the medication is helping, your doctor will obtain completed rating scales of your child's symptoms from you and your child's teachers when your child is at baseline (without medication) and is taking different medication doses. If there is no beneficial effect at the maximum recommended dose, your doctor will usually try another stimulant medication. Approximately 80% to 90% of children will respond to one of the stimulants.



Setting a Follow-up Plan

Your child will need to be seen frequently during the initial treatment phase. After a satisfactory dose has been found, your child will be scheduled for a follow-up visit at regular intervals, usually every 2 to 3 months.

At follow-up visits, your doctor will review rating scales from you and your child's teachers and will check weight, blood pressure, and emotional status and review any medication side effects.

Parent's follow-up responsibilities include

- Discuss your child's treatment program with appropriate school personnel.
- Bring copies of completed parent and teacher follow-up rating scales to all follow-up visits.
- Schools may be willing to fax completed follow-up rating scales to your doctor's office.
- Inform the doctor before the next scheduled visit if your child is experiencing serious medication side effects.
- Ask your child how he or she feels on the medication.
- Schedule follow-up visits.

Your doctor will set up an anticipated follow-up schedule with you at the time medication is started. They are more frequent, typically weekly at the beginning since there is the need to increase dose until the most effective dose is achieved. There should be a visit within 14 to 30 days after any change in medication and dosage. Once that stabilization occurs, the frequency of routine follow-up stretches out.

Remember: If you have any questions or if you see side effects that cause concern, do not wait for the next scheduled visit. Call and speak with the doctor, and the doctor will arrange an appropriate immediate or interval follow-up.

