



# Academy At Home

**Whether taking ADHD medication for the first time or switching to a new treatment plan, you should first pose these questions to your doctor.**



## 13 Questions to Ask Before Starting Any ADHD Medication

- 1. What type of medication is this: stimulant or non-stimulant?** Medications used to treat ADHD generally fall into two categories: stimulants and non-stimulants. Stimulants include—but aren't limited to—Adderall, Vyvanse, Ritalin, and Daytrana. Non-stimulants include Strattera, Wellbutrin, Intuniv, and a few others. Make sure you know the category of your prescribed medication; it will affect administration, expected side effects, and possibly diet. If the medication is a stimulant, ask whether it's a methylphenidate (like Ritalin) or an amphetamine (like Adderall)—though these medications work in similar ways, they're not the same and can lead to different outcomes in adults and children.
- 2. How does this medication work in the brain? How does it help ADHD?** In brief, scientific research suggests that stimulants work by changing the levels of dopamine in the brain; non-stimulants like Strattera instead interact with norepinephrine. Ask your doctor to explain how your medication affects your mind and body, and what changes in ADHD symptoms to expect.

**3. What side effects are normal with this medication?**

All medications come with some risk of side effects. Ask your doctor to go over the most common side effects—as well as some rare ones that can be extremely dangerous—associated with your prescription. If you're a parent asking about your child, ask the doctor what signs you should look out for—especially if your child isn't old enough to properly articulate what she's feeling.

**4. What health monitoring checks need to be done, if any?** Some doctors insist on regular cardiovascular checks for patients taking stimulants, particularly those with pre-existing heart conditions. On the other hand, non-stimulants can cause blood pressure to drop to dangerously low levels, so many doctors monitor blood pressure carefully. Ask your doctor about the type and frequency of tests you should expect.

**5. Are there any side effects that would warrant me to call you or to stop taking or administering this medication?**

Most side effects—like nausea, appetite loss, or irritability—are mild and should be no cause for alarm. Others can indicate a serious problem with a medication. For stimulants, these red flags include dizziness, fainting, pounding heartbeat, shortness of breath, weakness or numbness, or chest pain. When taking non-stimulants, serious allergic reactions—like hives, swelling, or trouble breathing—should be reported to a doctor immediately. Strattera, in particular, carries an increased risk of suicidal thoughts or actions. If you notice these in yourself or your child, call your doctor immediately.

**6. How will I know if this medication is working?**

When your medication is working effectively, you will have a *sustained focus*, we are not talking about hyperfocus or 'zombie focus'—we're just talking about a sustained focus. You are able to perhaps get paperwork done, or you're able to finish making the bed. Other signs include an improved mood, less extreme emotions, and less impulsivity—both physical and verbal. Ask your doctor which signs are typical for your particular symptoms, and how long they commonly take to appear.

## **7. When should this medication be taken?**

Stimulants typically start working within an hour and wear off within set time frames, so patients should work with their doctors to determine the most effective dosage time(s) given their unique schedules. Non-stimulants, on the other hand, need to build up in the body over several weeks and tend to work best if taken at the same time every day. Some patients report feeling drowsy after taking a non-stimulant; in these cases, experts suggest taking them at night. Your doctor should be open to discussing timing strategies with you.

## **8. Must this medication be taken every day?**

Since stimulants start working quickly and wash out of the body within a day, most patients can skip a dose or two without suffering any withdrawal-related symptoms—but this doesn't mean inconsistent use is the best choice. Talk to your doctor about drug holidays and effective treatment schedules before you decide to skip a dose of your stimulant. Non-stimulants usually need to be taken every day—otherwise, therapeutic levels of the medication in the bloodstream may drop and the medication may become less effective. If you want to stop taking a non-stimulant altogether, discuss it with your doctor—otherwise, do your best to take the medication every day.

Medication isn't a magic bullet. It helps manage some ADHD symptoms, but it does not cure the disorder.

## **9. If I want to stop taking this medication or stop administering it to my child, how do I do that?**

Stimulant medications generally do not cause withdrawal problems, but most experts recommend you taper off them slowly instead of quitting cold turkey. Non-stimulants are a little trickier, and may need to be tapered off in a structured pattern. Your doctor should be able to recommend an effective strategy for discontinuing medication; ask how other patients under her care have done so successfully.

**10. Is this medication taken with or without food?**

Different medications carry different food requirements. Some stimulants, for example, react poorly to Vitamin C; they shouldn't be taken with orange juice, a common breakfast drink. Ask your doctor to explain what interactions your medication might have with your food, as well as how to time your meals to maximise your medication's benefits.

**11. How long will this medication take to start working?**

Most stimulants start working within an hour, but make sure your doctor lets you know exactly what to expect from yours. Non-stimulants can take a few weeks to start showing results.

**12. How long do the effects of this medication last?**

When it comes to stimulants, you can't always trust the projected dosage window. Ask your doctor how long the medication should last, but also ask what to do if it lasts for a shorter or longer time than projected. When used properly, non-stimulants should offer around-the-clock coverage. Tell your doctor if this is not the case.

**13. What's the best way to monitor and adjust the dose of this medication? When is our next appointment?**

Whether you're starting ADHD medication for the first time, or switching to a new medication, your doctor should always have a plan for assessing and optimising the prescription's effectiveness. Doctors vary on this, so ask your provider what schedule he prefers for follow-up appointments.

*The information offered here is for informational purposes only and is not intended to substitute or replace professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always consult with your physician or other qualified health care professional before making any changes to your or your child's health care regime.*