



## Information for Parents: Stimulant Medications in Young Children

**What are stimulants?** The family of medication called stimulants includes methylphenidate and amphetamine salts. The brand names for these medications include Ritalin, Ritalin LA, Methylin, Metadate, Focalin, Focalin XR, Concerta, Dexedrine, Adderall, Adderall XR, and Vyvanse.

**What are these medications used to treat?** These medications treat the symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), including difficulty concentrating or focusing on activities, distractibility, extreme hyperactivity, and impulsivity (acting without thinking). They are recommended for children with ADHD who still have symptoms after behavioral therapy or whose symptoms are extreme and put them in danger.

**Why do we think these medications should help preschoolers with ADHD?** This family of medications has been used to treat ADHD symptoms since the 1930's. There are many research studies that show that medications in this family work better than placebo (non-active) pills to treat ADHD symptoms in children older than 5-years-old. There is one large research study that showed that methylphenidate (Ritalin) worked better than sugar pills to treat ADHD in children between 3 and 5 years old. However, it did not work as well in young children as in older children.

**What are the common side effects of these medications?** Most children do not have significant side effects with these medications. But, up to 1 in 4 children will have some side effects. The most common are difficulty sleeping, lower appetite, weight loss, and slowed growth.

**What are the possible serious side effects of these stimulant medications?** Very rarely, children may experience serious side effects when taking these medications, including aggression, more emotionality or irritability, trouble sleeping, and raised blood pressure.

**Why is my child's doctor asking about heart problems?** Some medical problems in a child or the family make us want to do extra tests before starting a stimulant. For example, we do extra testing for children who have had heart problems like "palpitations", were born with a significant heart problem, fainting, or seizures or who have a family member with a heart rhythm problem, an enlarged heart at a young age, or sudden death without an explanation.

Most children will not need any special tests before starting a stimulant medication.

**How will my child's doctor know if the medication is working and safe for him/her?** Your child's doctor will ask you and other adults in your child's life to fill out questionnaires about your child's symptoms to keep track of behavioral changes with the medication. We will also weigh your child at each visit and keep track of your child's height to make sure he/she continues to gain weight and grow while taking the medication. Also, we will also check your child's heart rate and blood pressure to be sure it is in the healthy range.

**What should I look for when my child is taking a stimulant medication?** Look for improvement in the signs of ADHD that you have noticed in your child (trouble concentrating, being too easily distracted, hyperactivity, acting without thinking). Let your child's doctor know if you see that your child is having

new trouble sleeping, less appetite, or becomes more emotional. Every child is different, so also let your child's doctor know if you notice anything new when your child starts a medication.

**How long will my child be on a stimulant medication?** You and your child's doctor will make a decision about when to take your child off the medication. Generally, it's a good idea for a young child to be taken off a stimulant medication after taking it for 6-9 months if the symptoms of ADHD are doing well. This time off lets you, your child, and your child's doctor see what symptoms the child still has without the medication and make careful decisions about what kind of treatment should continue.

**When should I stop giving my child stimulant medication?**

If the child complains of chest pain, has fainting spells or a seizure, or you feel concerned about some sudden change in behavior. It is best to call and talk directly with your child's doctor about any concerns you have about the medication your child is taking.

**What are the alternatives if I do not want my child to take a stimulant medication?** You are the boss. Whether your child takes a medication for ADHD is your decision, and your doctor will try to give you the best information available to help with the decision. The stimulant medications, especially methylphenidate are the best researched medicine for preschoolers' ADHD symptoms. However, special behavioral therapy ("parent management training") are the first thing to try for these symptoms. Other medications also can be considered, but they are a second choice because we do not know as much about these medications in preschoolers with ADHD.

**How to reach your child's doctor:**

For more information:

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts\\_for\\_families/](http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/)

American Academy of Pediatrics <http://www.aap.org/healthtopics/ADHD.cfm>

CHADD [www.Chadd.org](http://www.Chadd.org)

Parents Med Guide [www.Parentsmedguide.org](http://www.Parentsmedguide.org)