Risks and Benefits of Going off ADHD Medication

by KIKI WOODHAM

Should You Stop Taking ADHD Medication?

Medication can be a great help in treating the symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), but it has its flaws as well, which can make long-term treatment with medication difficult to maintain. You may have considered going off meds, or even gone so far as to try it. You might even have done it a few times. Some people do this without first consulting their doctor or therapist. Usually, symptoms of the disorder return in full force, and with them comes a desire to start taking the medication again.

Reasons For Stopping

If medication helps control symptoms, why stop in the first place? There are many reasons, all of them as unique as the person taking the medication. Generally speaking, they fall into a few basic categories.

Side Effects

One of the most common and relatable reasons people stop taking their ADHD medication is the adverse effects. These can cover a huge range of symptoms, including everything from racing heartbeat, to erectile dysfunction, to insomnia and fatigue, and can range from mild to unbearable.

When I've worked up to a higher dose of Ritalin in the past, I have the same constant lightheaded, nauseated, jittery feeling I get when I drink too much coffee on an empty stomach. It's not much fun, and can really impair my ability to focus and function, which is what the Ritalin was supposed to improve in the first place.

Developing a Tolerance

Stimulant medications like methylphenidate (Ritalin) can be of great help in treating ADHD and are generally the preferred course of therapy. However, stimulants have their flaws that can make long-term treatment with the drug difficult.

Namely, the need to regularly increase dosage until the maximum level is reached, followed by subsequently stopping usage for a period, can make management of symptoms difficult.

Misinformation

The Internet is an amazing tool when it comes to learning more about your disorder and its management. But let's face it, not everything you read online is true.

Googling phrases like 'Ritalin causes cancer,' for example, will bring up countless references to a study which found a startling increase in certain cell mutations over a three-month period; what you will not find links to, however, are the more recent articles pointing out that these measurements were a fluke and the study was

shown to be invalid.

There are even more blogs and sites with purely bogus claims that ADHD medications cause everything from cancer to diabetes, and countless people have stopped taking medication because of such rumors.

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Reasons For Stopping

"I'm Doing Better Now"

Oftentimes people with ADHD feel like things are going well enough to warrant a break from medication. Sometimes there have been structural changes in their everyday lives — help with organizational tasks, counselling, alternative therapies, a change in job — that make them feel that they may no longer need their ADHD medication.

Other times, they may feel as if things have been going so well that perhaps their symptoms have lessened or gone away. In some cases, especially when structural changes have taken place that might help to prevent serious rebound, reducing or completely cutting out medication might be of more benefit than continuing to take it.

Not Feeling Like Yourself

One thing I've heard many people with ADHD say is they don't quite feel normal when taking medication. Some might feel flat or emotionless; others feel their creativity is impaired. Still others feel constantly doped up or drugged. These can certainly be valid concerns, and in those cases you may be able to reduce or change your medication.

What to Do About It

Going off your ADHD medications for a clear reason can be a good decision. The most important thing to keep in mind is that the choice has to be one that works for you. Write down some of the problems you're experiencing or the reasons for wanting to stop, so you can compare these with how you feel after quitting your meds.

Talk to your doctor or therapist about going off your medication; he or she may be able to offer alternative types of support to help you better cope with your symptoms unmedicated. They may also offer you alternative medications that could lessen or eliminate the circumstances that made you want to stop in the first place.

If you decide to go off meds completely, make sure you take proper precautions to prevent or reduce withdrawal symptoms. Some medications require you to taper your dose off over a period of time, because abrupt withdrawal can be miserable and even dangerous.

When you've stopped taking medications, take notes on how you feel now. Look at what you wrote down when you were thinking about stopping, and compare those feelings or goals to the reality. Try to form an objective picture of how your life is affected both by medication and by the lack of it.

Lastly, never say never. It can be all too easy to swear you'll never touch another pill again, but there may come a time when you will need to — perhaps you'll land a more demanding job, go back to school, or face other new challenges in your life.

Just remember that many people with ADHD go off — and on, and off — their meds. This is normal, and can be a healthy part of your personal growth. Stay open to different treatment possibilities and keep an eye out for signs that you might need an extra helping hand, whether in the form of medication, therapy or something else. At the end of the day, there is no wrong answer, as long as you're open to the questions.