Medication Options for Children With ADHD

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ADHD Medications for Children

If your child has been diagnosed with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), you probably have many questions about the medication options available. Finding the right medication isn't easy and what best works for your child will require some time to figure out.

What Is ADHD?

ADHD in children manifests in signs of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a doctor can make a diagnosis of ADHD based on specific criteria found in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth edition (DSM-5).

This generally includes six or more specific symptoms of inattention or hyperactively on a regular basis for six or more months. The doctor may also look at your child's behavior and compare it to other children of the same age.

How Is ADHD Treated?

Treating ADHD in children requires medical, behavioral, psychological, and educational intervention. This type of treatment approach is called multimodal, and according to the National Institute of Mental Health, involves parent and child education about treatment and support, behavioral therapy, medication, counseling, and school support.

One study of the medical journal, *Archives of General Psychiatry,* finds that combination treatment of medication, behavioral treatment, and community care were effective in reducing ADHD symptoms. The study also reported these benefits lasting for up to 14 months.

The Role of Medication

For most children with ADHD, medication is part of a multimodal treatment plan. The goal of medicinal treatment is not to control behavior, but rather to improve symptoms of ADHD to help your child focus and function effectively.

If you decide medication therapy is an option for your child, you should learn as much as you can about medication options and talk them over with your child's doctor to figure out the best plan for treating your child's symptoms.

Drug Therapy Options

There is no specific or set formula used for treating children with ADHD. It may take time to find the right medicine and dosage and these medications may pose side effects, but most of these occur early on and eventually go away on their own.

Stimulants

A class of medications called stimulants are highly effective in treating ADHD in children and are known for helping children focus and ignore distractions. At least 80 percent of children who use stimulant medications – whether alone or with behavioral therapy – will respond positively, according to a report in the journal *Pediatrics.*

One study, reported in the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychopharmacology,* finds children aged 7 to 11 may benefit from medication therapy to treat ADHD. Most of the children treated with stimulant medication showed significant academic improvements compared to children with ADHD who had not received medicinal treatment.

Stimulants do not excite or get children worked up, despite their name. They work by normalizing brain chemical neurotransmitters responsible for regulating attention.

Stimulant medications are short-acting, which means they do not stay in the body for long. Once your child wakes up in the morning, they are out of his or her system.

No studies have shown these medications have disabling or long-term effects and most two-year follow-ups show them to be safe and effective.

Some stimulant medication options available for treating childhood ADHD are Adderall, Concerta, Daytrana, Focalin, Ritalin, Quillivant XR and Vyvanse.

Non-Stimulants

While stimulants are usually the most effective choice, they aren't for everyone and may not work well for some child or cause side effects. Strattera, Kapvay, and Intuniv are three non-stimulant medication options for children and teens.

Stattera boosts the brain chemical, norepinephrine, increasing attentiveness and lessening impulsiveness and hyperactivity. Kapvay and Intuniv effect certain areas of the brain and studies show they help to lower distractibility and improve attention, memory, and impulsiveness.

Non-stimulants generally don't cause sleep issues, anxiety,or lack of appetite. They don't pose the same risk of abuse or addiction stimulants do.

Watch for Side Effects

Most children treating with ADHD medications experience mild side effects. These may include reduced appetite, weight loss, trouble sleeping, tics, headaches, and stomachaches.

Most side effects of these medications are not dangerous, but you should report all of these to your child's doctor, especially if they are causing discomfort or affecting daily activities. Side effects can be helped by adjusting dosage, taking the medication at a different time, or switching medications altogether.

Rare side effects of ADHD medications include heart-related problems, hallucinations, suicidal thoughts, and liver problems. These have only been reported in 1 out of every 10,000 people taking these medications.

Ongoing Process

Medication can lead to remarkable improvements in your child's ability to focus, follow directions, and can even improve behavior and help them to get along with others. But medication alone isn't the answer and behavioral

strategies should also be part of your child’s treatment plan.

Medication doesn’t cure your child’s ADHD. It eventually wears off or stops working and you will need to find another treatment that helps. You should have your child reevaluated at least once a year, since symptoms will change over time as your child gets older.

Many parents resist or put off medicating their child for ADHD, but once they make the decision to do so, they realize it was a good decision. In fact, most children who are effectively treating for ADHD with a multimodal treatment plan have improved self-esteem and something this simple be quite life altering.