

9 Rules *for* Using ADHD Medications *Safely and* Effectively



From **ADDitude's** Experts

ADDITUDE
LIVING WELL WITH **ATTENTION DEFICIT**

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9 Rules for Using ADHD Medications Safely and Effectively

Medication can be very effective at reducing symptoms of attention deficit disorder, such as hyperactivity, inattention, and/or impulsivity. But it's essential to pick the right medication and to use it properly.

Here, Dr. Larry Silver and Dr. William Dodson, each a psychiatrist with over 30 years of treating children and adults with ADHD, offer rules to maximize the benefits of medication:

Note: Always consult with your physician or other qualified health-care professional for questions about the health of you, your child, and family members. The information in this booklet and on ADDitudemag.com does not replace professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

1. Make sure the diagnosis is correct.

Not all people who are hyperactive, inattentive, or impulsive have ADHD. These behaviors can also be caused by anxiety or depression, as well as by learning disabilities. A teacher or a spouse might say that you or your child has trouble sitting still. A psychological test might reveal behaviors suggestive of ADHD. But such reports are not enough. To confirm the diagnosis, the characteristic behaviors must be shown to be chronic (to have existed before age six) and pervasive (to have been observed in at least two life settings—at school, at home, with peers, and so on.)

2. Choose a doctor who will closely monitor the medication.

Consider seeking the specialized care of a developmental pediatrician, neurologist, or psychiatrist. They may offer a deeper working knowledge of the newest medications and more experience with drug therapy, as well as the time available to work with you or your child. A doctor should be willing to see you or your child at least every two to four weeks during the first couple of months. He should ask the following questions:

How are the meds working?

Are there any troubling side effects?

3. Don't expect to find the right medication right away.

Some people respond well to methylphenidate and others to dextro-amphetamine/levo-amphetamine. Others fare better on a non-stimulant medication, such as a tricyclic antidepressant or atomoxetine. The only way to tell whether a particular medication works for you or your child is through trial and error.

4. Pick the right dose: start at the lowest dose and adjust upward, if necessary.

With stimulant medications, the dose is based not on gender, age, or body weight but on the rate at which the body absorbs the medication. The only way to find the correct dose for you or your youngster is through trial and error.

Doctors start at the lowest dose to provide a baseline for how much more (if any) of the ADHD medication is needed. Because everyone has a unique response to medication and metabolizes it at a different rate, a physician may need to increase the dosage to arrive at an optimal dose.

For example, your doctor might start with 5 mg. and, if that doesn't work within three to five days, move up to 10 mg., then 15 mg., and, if necessary, 20 mg. If you or your child becomes unusually irritable or tearful—or seems to be in a cloud—the dose should be reduced.

Did You Know: Doctors typically adjust medication dosages every three to seven days.

5. Monitor the ADHD medication closely to chart how—or if—it is working.

Help the doctor arrive at the right dosage by tracking you or your child's response to the medication. ADHD behavior rating scales are very effective. The *SNAP-IV Scale* gauges 90 physical symptoms and emotional behaviors at home and in the classroom. The scale can help parents assess a child's behavior throughout the day and detect patterns and problems with medication. The *Conners' Rating Scales-Revised (CRS-R)* comes in a short and long form. Experts recommend that parents use the long form themselves and reserve the short form for their child's teacher(s), who probably has less time to fill out the evaluation.

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6. Alert the doctor about any side effects.

William W. Dodson, M.D., a Denver-based psychiatrist specializing in ADHD, wishes more parents would be patient about side effects. “There’s a tendency for people to throw up their hands at the first difficulty instead of working with the physician as they would with the treatment of any other disorder,” says Dodson. “Getting ADHD meds to work to their optimal benefit requires patience.”

Stimulants can cause sleep problems, loss of appetite, headache, and stomachache. A very uncommon side effect is motor tics. If you or your child develops side effects, the doctor should work with you to minimize them. If side effects cannot be controlled, another medication is needed.

7. Don’t be too trusting of a medication’s listed duration.

Just because a pill is supposed to control ADHD symptoms for a certain length of time doesn’t mean that it will. A four-hour pill might work for only three hours. An eight-hour capsule might last for six to 10 hours, a 12-hour capsule, 10 to 14 hours. Observe you or your child’s behavior to determine how long each dose lasts.

8. Be sure you or your child are on medication when it is needed.

Some people need medication all day, every day. Others need coverage only for certain activities. Odds are a child needs to be on medication during the school day and adults may need coverage while at the office. How about homework time? What about leisure activities? Once you determine when symptoms dictate coverage, the physician can work out a suitable medication regimen.

9. Consider diet and nutrition.

A high-fat breakfast can compromise medication effectiveness, delaying absorption. Juices rich in ascorbic acid/vitamin C or citric acid (orange and grapefruit) and drinks supplemented with vitamin C may interfere with the absorption of methylphenidate. Citric acid breaks down the medication before it has a chance to be absorbed by the body.

Did You Know: Cold/sinus/hay fever medications that contain decongestants (antihistamines without decongestants are OK) may cause a mildly unpleasant “buzz” in people on ADHD medications. Over-the-counter or prescription weight-control medications, steroids, and asthma medications containing albuterol or theophylline can have the same effect.

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Larry Silver, M.D., is the author of *Dr. Larry Silver's Advice to Parents on AD/HD* and *The Misunderstood Child: Understanding and Coping with Your Child's Learning Disabilities*. He is also a clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

William W. Dodson, M.D., is a board-certified psychiatrist who has specialized in adults with ADHD for the last 22 years. A former faculty member at Georgetown University and the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, Dodson is a Life Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and a member of *ADDitude's* Medical Advisory Board.

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