

Medication Management for Adults with AD/HD

by Philip J. Parker, M.D.

It is very important to match your individual needs with what a medication will probably do—or not do—for your symptoms.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) is a mental disorder that often lasts from childhood into adulthood. Medication is an integral part of treatment for adults. Medication alone does not always help a person do a better job with problems such as disorganization, managing time, deciding what is most important or just coping with life. But proper medication helps the symptoms of AD/HD—such as not being able to concentrate or control unwanted behavior—and allows an adult to learn important skills he or she needs to succeed in life.

A health professional cannot tell at first which medication will help which patient the most. You may have to try several medications before you find the one—or the combination—that works best for you.

Stimulants

Stimulants are a group of drugs that change the way the brain's chemical messages get from some brain cells to others. They are the first kind of medication a doctor usually tries when treating AD/HD in both children and adults.

The two stimulants most commonly used are called *methylphenidate* (MPH) and *amphetamines* (AMP). The government controls their availability because people could abuse them if they are not used the way a doctor prescribes them.

Editor's Note: The following information provides a primer on medication management for adults. It is adapted from the National Resource Center on AD/HD (NRC) Information and Resource Sheet #11 "Medication Management for Adults with AD/HD," developed by Philip Parker, M.D., Attention Deficit Disorder Association, and approved in 2004 by CHADD's Professional Advisory Board. The full version of the Information and Resource Sheet is available at www.help4adhd.org.

Several things influence the way a person reacts to stimulant medication: how much medication is taken, how much medication gets into the bloodstream, and how the amount of medication changes the blood levels.

You may need coaching, tutoring or counseling in addition to the medication.

There is no reason to choose one kind of stimulant over the other for someone who has not yet tried either. Both forms of medications—MPH and AMP—affect the brain somewhat differently, so they probably affect people differently.

If you don't do well on one kind of stimulant, you and your doctor will most likely try the other. The medication and the amount taken must match each person's individual needs.

Talk to your doctor about what side effects you might have with the stimulant he or she prescribes. Side effects of stimulants in adults are generally not serious. They may include one or more of the following: trouble sleeping, headaches, anxiety, loss of appe-

Four Ways Adults can be Proactive in Medication Management by Robert M. Tudisco, Esq.

THE SUCCESS of your diagnosis and treatment depends on your active participation. Consider the following tips to maximize the effectiveness of your medication plan.

Be Captain of Your Healthcare Team—Remember that you are the common denominator. It is important that your primary care physician be in the loop with your mental health care provider and that you encourage regular communication between them.

Keep a Medication Diary—The time you spend with your treating doctor is a relatively small slice of your life. Observations made on a daily basis, by you and those around you, will help your doctor tailor your prescription to your particular needs.

Be Patient and Keep an Open Mind—In many instances a co-existing condition can impact your response to medication. It is important that your doctor uncover other health issues that may affect your response to medication in order to determine the best course of treatment.

Be Realistic about Your Medication—Medication is not a cure for AD/HD, but can help manage its symptoms. Behavioral supports are also important. Think of medication as a useful tool that helps you make positive changes in your life.

Being an active partner with your health care providers can make your treatment of AD/HD more effective. It can also go a long way toward empowering you to retake control of your life. ■

Robert M. Tudisco, Esq., is a practicing attorney and adult diagnosed with AD/HD. He is a member of *Attention!* magazine's Editorial Advisory Board and has researched and written extensively on adult coping mechanisms and legal and advocacy issues. He welcomes questions and comments at his Web site, www.ADDcopingskills.com.



tite and weight loss. Sometimes there are heart rate or blood pressure side effects.

Nonstimulant Medications

Most nonstimulant medications generally aren't used to treat AD/HD unless stimulants don't help or a patient has another psychiatric illness that would become worse if stimulants were used.

Atomoxetine is a new, nonstimulant for people with AD/HD. Its side effects—which are often mild and may go away during treatment—include dry mouth, insomnia, nausea, constipation, loss of appetite, dizziness, decreased sexual interest and performance and problems with urination. It also may have heart and blood pressure side effects. Potential liver damage has recently been identified as a serious side effect. Atomoxetine appears to work as well as stimulants.

Antidepressants

Antidepressants are medications that help treat depression, but some also seem to help with the symptoms of AD/HD. The reverse is also true: some antidepressants may actually make AD/HD symptoms worse. There are different types of antidepressants, and each works somewhat differently.

Choosing a Medication

It is very important to match your individual needs with what a medication will probably do—or not do—for your symptoms. For a long time, stimulants have been the best medications to try first. You and your health professional must think about both the benefits and the possible side effects of any medication you try.

For example, an adult may have very serious AD/HD symptoms, which could cause him or her to lose a job, *and* a problem with high blood pressure. With help from a health professional, this adult may choose a medication for AD/HD that is helpful during the workday, but does not cause blood pressure problems.

Keeping Track of the Effects of Medication

It is important to know how well your medication works over time. Keeping track of how you react to your medication takes a lot of effort. The effort is worth it because you and your healthcare professional will then know when it is best to take the medication and how much you should take. It will help you both decide if you need other medications or if, for example, you need more help with problem behavior. You may need coaching, tutoring or counseling in addition to the medication.

Improving Quality of Life

Treating the basic symptoms of AD/HD is very important, but it is often not the only goal of treatment. Treatment can also help you with problems you have in the real world. It can help you be more self-sufficient and to better cope with the demands of everyday life.

Conclusion

Problems with AD/HD can continue after childhood. Medication is the basic part of treatment. Psychostimulants are usually the medications tried first, but many nonstimulant treatments are available, too. Medications can help most adults with AD/HD lead a better life. ■

The information provided in this Information and Resource Sheet was supported by Cooperative Agreement Number R04/CCR 321831-01 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of CDC.

Philip Parker, M.D., is a private-practice psychiatrist who treats adults. He has presented at the National Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA) and CHADD conferences about various medication issues for AD/HD in adults. Dr. Parker is on the Professional Advisory Board of ADDA and is assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the Wayne State University School of Medicine.

You and your health professional must think about both the benefits and the possible side effects of any medication you try.