

Doc Talk

By Dr. Veronica Naudin



Medicating ADHD - Is it Safe?

Q: My child has been diagnosed with ADHD. We have struggled with the decision but now feel that it may be time to do a trial of stimulant medication. My mother says this might be dangerous and I should see a cardiologist before starting. What do you think?

A: ADHD is a complicated disorder. This common neurobehavioral disorder is characterized by developmentally inappropriate levels of hyperactivity, inattention, and impulsivity. For children with this learning disability, it is often wise to approach the diagnosis cautiously and to try behavioral modification therapy before starting medications. However, there comes a time when watching children with ADD and ADHD, that a trial of medications becomes important. Children with untreated ADHD can suffer long-term consequences.

Medications for ADHD

Medications for this disorder are usually stimulants. It is often confusing to parents who wonder why we should prescribe a stimulant medication to a child who is already overactive. The logic is based on understanding the disorder. Children with ADHD have neurological receptors which are overly sensitive to the everyday stimuli. That means they are more likely to focus on other people's conversations, noises outside of the classroom, and the images around them.

COMMON Medications used to treat ADHD and ADD include:

- AMPHETAMINE (DEXTROAMPHETAMINE, DEXTROSTAT, ADDERALL, VYVANSE)
- METHYLPHENIDATE (RITALIN, RITALIN SR, CONCERTA, METADATE, FOCALIN)
- ATOMOXETINE (STRATTERA.)

For the most part, these medications have been used safely and effectively for many years. The common side effects of stimulant medications included decreased appetite, insomnia, emotional lability, stomach aches, and headaches. Data from multisite clinical trials indicate that these medications are generally safe for healthy children.

However, in 2005, there were a few reported cases of sudden cardiac death in pediatric patients using medication for ADHD. In 2005, the FDA released a health advisory for the use of Adderall and Adderall XR. Canada suspended the sale of Adderall and the FDA initiated studies to try to determine the risks of using these medications. Later studies have shown that the children with sudden death likely had a predisposing cardiac lesion. Interesting, there has also been a lot of interest in preventing sudden cardiac death in teen athletes. This has also been studied and different countries have different approaches to screening teens for their risk of sudden cardiac death.

In 2008, the American Heart Association has made a recommendation to screen all children for cardiac issues prior to initiating therapy with stimulant medications. The screening should include a blood pressure, heart examination, family medical history and possibly an ECG. Hence, it would be wise to discuss this issue further with your pediatrician. For children who have been taking stimulant medications for several months or years, there is no evidence that these medications should be discontinued. However, if you have concerns or have any family medical history for heart disease, I would encourage you to discuss these with your primary physician today.

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Dr. Jorge Castro, Dr. Veronica Naudin, Dr. Stanley Ambo, and Dr. Lyra Ng are dedicated to providing you with the quality health care that you desire for your children.

Please send questions and/or suggestions to:

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