HEALTH BASICS

Medicines for ADHD

Medicines for ADHD are prescription treatments that can reduce symptoms and support daily functioning.

WHAT IT IS
Prescription treatments that reduce core ADHD symptoms

WHERE IT COMES UP
After diagnosis, during treatment reviews, and at pharmacies

WHY IT MATTERS
Can improve attention, impulse control, and daily functioning

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a cure or an ADHD diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
ADHD prescriber or pharmacist

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Symptom review, side-effect review, pulse, blood pressure, and growth

Overview

Medicines for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, are a group of prescription treatments. They are not a disease, diagnosis, or cure.

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition. This means it affects how the brain develops and manages attention, activity, and impulses. Medication may reduce these difficulties, but it does not remove ADHD or change who you are.

The two main groups are stimulants and non-stimulants.

Stimulants like methylphenidate or lisdexamfetamine include methylphenidate and medicines based on amphetamine, such as lisdexamfetamine and dexamfetamine. Despite their name, stimulants can help a person with ADHD feel less restless or distracted by improving control of attention and impulses.

Non-stimulants include atomoxetine and medicines that affect adrenaline-related signals, such as guanfacine or clonidine. Viloxazine is another non-stimulant available in some countries.

The available medicines and approved ages differ between countries. Some products work for a few hours, while extended-release products are designed to work for much of the day. A

prescriber chooses among them based on factors such as age, daily schedule, other health conditions, previous response, and side effects.

How it works

ADHD medicines change the activity of chemical messengers in the brain. These messengers help brain cells communicate.

Stimulants mainly increase the activity of dopamine and noradrenaline, also called norepinephrine. These chemicals are involved in attention, motivation, planning, and control of impulses. Stimulants usually begin working on the day they are taken, although finding a suitable medicine and dose can take time.

Atomoxetine mainly increases noradrenaline activity. Guanfacine and clonidine act on receptors involved in attention and the body's stress-response system. Viloxazine also affects noradrenaline-related signalling. Non-stimulants may take longer than stimulants to show their full effect.

A helpful response may include better concentration, fewer impulsive actions, or an improved ability to complete everyday tasks. The aim is not to create constant focus or make someone unusually quiet. Medication should not flatten personality or make a person feel unlike themselves.

Why it matters for your health

Medication can reduce core ADHD symptoms and make it easier to use skills learned through education, coaching, therapy, or practical support. Possible benefits may be seen at school, work, home, or in relationships.

Response is individual. One person may benefit greatly from a particular medicine, while another may have little improvement or troublesome side effects. A poor response to one product does not show that all ADHD medicines will be ineffective.

Treatment decisions should consider meaningful daily outcomes, not only whether someone appears calmer. Examples include completing essential tasks, driving more safely, following conversations, or managing impulsive behaviour.

ADHD medicines also require monitoring. Stimulants can affect appetite, sleep, pulse, and blood pressure. In children and teenagers, reduced appetite may affect weight gain or growth. Non-stimulants have their own effects that need review.

Most stimulants are legally controlled medicines because they can be misused or shared. The exact rules differ by country. Safe storage and careful prescription handling are therefore part of treatment.

What can go wrong

Side effects do not affect everyone, and they may improve after a dose or timing adjustment. Do not change the dose or stop treatment on your own unless you have been given a specific plan.

Stimulant side effects can include reduced appetite, difficulty sleeping, headache, stomach discomfort, dry mouth, or a faster pulse. Some people experience increased anxiety, irritability, or a rise in blood pressure.

Atomoxetine can cause nausea, reduced appetite, tiredness, sleep disturbance, or changes in pulse and blood pressure. Rarely, it has been linked to serious liver injury. In the United States, its prescribing information warns about suicidal thoughts in children and teenagers.

Guanfacine and clonidine may cause sleepiness, dizziness, low blood pressure, or a slow pulse. Suddenly stopping these medicines can cause blood pressure to rise, so a prescriber may need to reduce them gradually.

Viloxazine can affect appetite, sleep, pulse, or blood pressure. Its United States prescribing information includes a warning about suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

Stimulants can be misused by taking more than prescribed, using them in a different way, or giving them to someone else. Misuse can cause dependence, severe anxiety, heart problems, or overdose. Sharing prescription medicine is unsafe even when the other person has similar difficulties.

Arrange routine follow-up if side effects are persistent, the medicine is not helping, doses are regularly missed, or the treatment does not last through the required part of the day. Also report new tics, ongoing mood changes, poor appetite, or sleep problems.

Seek urgent medical advice for new hallucinations, extreme agitation, manic behaviour, yellow skin or eyes, dark urine, or a painful erection. An erection lasting four hours or more needs emergency care.

Call emergency services for chest pain, severe breathing difficulty, collapse, a seizure, signs of a severe allergic reaction, an overdose, or immediate danger from suicidal thoughts. If an extra dose has been taken, contact a poison information service or urgent medical service rather than waiting for symptoms.

What you can do

Before starting medication, give the prescriber an up-to-date list of medicines, supplements, nicotine products, and recreational substances. Mention heart conditions, fainting, seizures, glaucoma, liver problems, severe mood episodes, and any family history of sudden unexplained cardiac death.

Some ADHD medicines interact with antidepressants like sertraline or fluoxetine , blood pressure medicines, cold remedies, and monoamine oxidase inhibitors, also called MAOIs. A pharmacist can check for interactions. Pregnancy, plans for pregnancy, and breastfeeding also need an individual medication review.

Ask what benefit the medicine is intended to provide and when it should be noticeable. Agree on practical outcomes to track, such as completing work, remembering instructions, or managing impulsive spending.

Keep a brief record of:

Attend planned reviews. These may include checks of pulse and blood pressure, along with height and weight in children and teenagers. An electrocardiogram, or ECG, is not needed for everyone, but it may be considered when the medical history or examination suggests a heart concern.

Take the medicine exactly as labelled. Do not crush or open an extended-release product unless the product instructions specifically allow it. Ask a pharmacist what to do after a missed dose because the answer differs between medicines.

Store stimulants securely, keep them in their labelled container, and never share them. Return unused medicine through an approved pharmacy or medicine take-back service where available.

- When each dose is taken
- Changes in attention and daily functioning
- Appetite, sleep, mood, and unwanted effects
- How long the benefit appears to last
- Missed doses or difficulty obtaining the medicine

Common questions

Will ADHD medicine change my personality?

That is not the goal. Effective treatment should support attention and self-control while allowing you to feel like yourself. Feeling emotionally flat, unusually withdrawn, or markedly irritable is a reason to request a medication review.

Are stimulants addictive?

Prescribed stimulants can be misused and may cause dependence, which is why they are controlled in many countries. Taking them exactly as prescribed and storing them securely reduces risk. Tell the prescriber if you have concerns about substance use or feel driven to take extra doses.

Do I need to take medicine every day?

The answer depends on the medicine, your treatment goals, and the prescriber's plan. Some medicines should not be stopped suddenly. Do not plan medication breaks or skip doses without checking first.

Can medication be used without therapy or practical support?

Medication is one treatment option. Education about ADHD, adjustments at school or work, sleep support, organisational strategies, and psychological treatment may also help. The useful combination is different for each person.

How will I know whether it is working?

Look for changes in real tasks and situations, not only a feeling that the medicine has "kicked in." Feedback from family, school, or work may be useful when you choose to involve them. Regular reviews can compare benefits with side effects.

Sources

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