

# THE IMPACT OF ADHD MEDICATIONS ON APPETITE

## What is ADHD?

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a condition that affects a young child's behaviour and learning. Children with ADHD often have difficulty concentrating and may be easily distracted. School reports might describe a child that 'daydreams' and tunes out during lessons. They can also be impulsive and overactive or fidgety.

It is important to recognise that in one sense, all young children can have difficulties when it comes to sitting still and learning. It is part of normal developmental behaviour. ADHD requires specific criteria to be met and a specialist review before a diagnosis is made.

## Treatment options for ADHD

One treatment for ADHD can be 'stimulant medication'. Stimulants (called dexamphetamine and methylphenidate) are the most used medications in Australia.<sup>1</sup>

They increase dopamine levels in the brain, which, helps to improve concentration and reduce hyperactivity. Usually, children feel a calming effect within half an hour of taking stimulant medications. Using medications in the correct situation can mean the difference between a child struggling or succeeding at school.

In studies, approximately 70% of children with ADHD experience significant benefits from treatment with stimulant medication, especially when it is combined with behavioural management.<sup>2</sup>

### What are the side effects of stimulant medication?



Appetite suppression and weight loss



Headaches



Inability to sleep



Stomach aches

Many children taking stimulant medication have very low appetite during the day while the medication is most active. They tend to feel slightly hungry in the early evening and get very hungry later in the evening. This effect on appetite can reduce within a couple of months after starting the medication.

If your child is taking stimulants, it's advisable to have your doctor check their weight on a regular basis. However, avoid placing too much focus on weight, as children may already be sensitive to their diagnosis and medication, so adding concerns about weight could potentially increase their anxiety. Having said that, we do need to be careful that they aren't falling off the growth charts.

## How do we help children on stimulant medication that have a reduced appetite?

### Tip 1 – Don't force your child to eat when they are not hungry!

Putting pressure on children to eat when they are not hungry only tends to make matters worse. Pick your battles – they will eat when they are ready. Some days, children may eat very little, and you're left wondering how they are still functioning. Even on days like this, ensure they are hydrated with water, and provide smaller snacks to compensate for the lack of appetite.

### Tip 2 – Look for appetite opportunities with your child<sup>3</sup>

Try to find 'windows of opportunity' when your child is hungry. Offer them healthy yet desirable snacks during this time. It might be handy to have a small platter of food in the afternoon that they can nibble on, with options like crackers, cheese, fruits, nuts and a smoothie.



### Tip 3 – Eat before medication in the morning

Eating a substantial breakfast in the morning before they take their medication will help you accept that lunch will probably come home untouched. Also, as the effects of the medication tend to wear off by the evening, it may be helpful to have a larger dinner prepared and a snack before bedtime. If your child doesn't like to eat typical breakfast foods, try a complete and balanced Oral Nutritional Supplement like PediaSure which provides a nutrition and energy boost for the morning.

It pays to be open and honest with children who are prescribed stimulant medication that they are likely to experience lower appetite. Together, you can then figure out a system that works for them. You may also choose to implement other tips with your child. Such as, setting up reminders throughout the day, speaking with their school teacher, and having medication breaks on weekends or in school holidays (in discussions with a healthcare professional).

For additional support for your child, speak to an Accredited Practising Dietitian.



# GROW STRONG

Pediasure is a Food for Special Medical Purposes. Use under medical supervision.

References: 1. Better Health Channel. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder – therapies. Available at: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-therapies>. 2. Hazell P. Aust Prescr. 1995;18:60–3. 3. Additude. Does ADHD Medication Make Every Meal a Power Struggle? Available at: <https://www.additudemag.com/does-adhd-medication-make-every-meal-a-power-struggle/>

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