

ADHD pharmacological treatment

The Attention Deficit with or without hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental problem affecting from 5 to 8% of children and 4% of adults. The studies in neurosciences show that the brain of people affected by ADHD develop itself and works differently. People living with ADHD can show difficulties to modulate ideas (inattention), gestures (restlessness), behaviours (impulsivity) and feelings (emotional hyper-reactivity). ADHD can have impacts on many spheres of life. ADHD's treatment's goal is to reduce the intensity of the symptoms and lower their impacts to allow the person to achieve her full potential.

With and without ADHD, everybody takes advantage in taking care of himself and his brain (universal strategies). The diagnosis of ADHD allows to better understand what hides behind the symptoms and put specific strategies in place such as adaptative measures in academic or professional environments and a medication.

The Canadian ADHD Resource Alliance (CADDRA): Canadian ADHD Practice Guidelines (caddra.ca) support that the treatment of ADHD begins with the confirmation of the diagnosis. Understanding what ADHD is allows to put in place personalized and efficient adaptative strategies. Consulting an ADHD support group is often helpful. Depending on the targeted problematics, undergoing a specific therapy with specialists like a psychologist, a psychoeducator, a speech therapist, an occupational therapist or a teacher can be very useful. When these strategies cannot counterbalance the impacts of ADHD or if the compensatory burden (cost in energy and time) is significant, it is possible the doctor suggests integrating a medication to the treatment plan. It acts a little like a pair of biological glasses that improves the brain's capacity to «be focused» and then better self-modulate.

The standard pharmacological treatment consists in taking psychostimulant type or non-stimulant type medications. The adjustment of the doses is done progressively and under medical supervision. When the good dosage is reached, the clinical response is notable within a few days for the psychostimulants and a few weeks for the non-psychostimulants. Many release modes exist. Some products have a shorter action while others work all day long. The pharmacological treatments of ADHD have proven efficiency. These drugs are generally well tolerated. It is important to know the potential side effects and how to deal with them. The approach must be individualized. Some people show a better therapeutic response to a product rather than another. Maybe some trials will have to be done before finding the right drug and the right dosage. *Be aware! The clinical and genetic profiles cannot help predicting which one will be the most effective.*



The pharmacological treatment, integrated in a multimodal approach, aims to improve the functioning and the quality of life of the people living with ADHD. It is important to consider the positive effects (primary) versus the unwanted effects (side effects) the medication brings. This quest for balance can guide the decision between the choices of continuing, modifying or stopping taking a medication. Taking medications for ADHD must always be done under medical supervision after an assessment confirming such a treatment is indicated.

Here are some elements to consider:

- ❑ **Target the expected effects** of the medication on the identified ADHD symptoms (inattention-hyperactivity-impulsivity). *Be careful! The ADHD medications should not be used to compensate the cognitive fatigue associated to an unhealthy lifestyle. The energetic level and the academic results are NOT a target of the pharmacological treatment of ADHD.*
- ❑ **Keep reasonable expectations on the effects of the medication.** There is no magic pill! The medication acts like a pair of glasses for the brain. Well adjusted glasses make it possible to see the letters, not to read or make the text more interesting!
- ❑ **Slowly adjust the dosage** to identify appropriately the minimal efficient dose and reduce the presence of side effects.
- ❑ **Encourage a regular intake** of the medication.
- ❑ **Minimise omissions.** Adopting a routine, setting an alarm and using a pill distribution box are very useful tricks.
- ❑ **Coordinate the moments when the medication is efficient with those when ADHD causes a functional impact.**
- ❑ As much as possible, **regularly measure** the effects of the medication on the targeted symptoms of ADHD while keeping the present side effects in mind. (Interesting tools: CADDRA Pharmacological follow up forms, SNAP-IV-26 and ASRS; available in the eToolkit, caddra.ca)
- ❑ **In presence of partial response to the medication or persisting or disabling side effects, consider the following options with your doctor:**
 - Changing the medication for a different release mode or active ingredient.
 - Planning dose reduction or treatment interruption periods (i.e.: on weekends or during vacation).
 - Interrupting the treatment.



Specific side effects: What's to be done?

Loss of appetite

- ✓ *Modify the food intakes: vary the tastes and the foods, consider a liquid meal, favor smaller portions, snacks and allow snack-like meals in the evening such as cheese, yogurt, biscuits, chewy bars, cereals, « fruit and yoghurt smoothies », milk shake.*
- ✓ *Avoid spoiling your appetite with snacking on something or beverages, even water, taken between meals or regular snacks.*
- ✓ *Increase the calorie intake of meals (choose healthy foods with a higher fat intake (i.e.: yoghurt with more than 2 % M.F. instead of fat free)*

Nauseas / Abdominal pain

- ✓ *Take the medication after eating (on a full stomach).*

Effects on the mood

- ✓ *Report to the doctor any significant mood changes like an unpleasant feeling of nervousness, excitement, sadness, morosity, impatience, being more prone to anger, less tolerant or a « zombie effect ».*

Headaches

- ✓ *Generally, headaches are light and temporary. You may take acetaminophen if needed.*

Dry mouth

- ✓ *Drink more water and chew gum (sugarless).*
- ✓ *Pay attention to brush your teeth (less saliva increases the risk of cavities).*

Palpitations, pulse and blood pressure modification

- ✓ *Report to your doctor any important variation of the pulse or the blood pressure.*
- ✓ *Pay attention to stimulating foods like coffee and energy drinks as well as salt in the diet.*

Sleep difficulties

- ✓ *Work on your sleep hygiene (see document ADHD and Life Balance)*

Tics intensification

- ✓ *Some medications for ADHD can intensify pre-existing tics (i.e.: Gilles de la Tourette's syndrome) but do not cause them.*
- ✓ *Report to your doctor if twitches show up or intensify.*

Suggested Resources



CLINIQUE FOCUS

cliniquefocus.com / attentiondeficit-info.com

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