

ADHD MEDICATION · 4.15

# What to Do If Your ADHD Medication Stops Working

When ADHD medication feels like it has stopped working, the cause is most often something around the medication rather than the medication itself. Here is the structured approach to working out what has changed.

FOR

Adults whose ADHD medication seems less effective

AUDIENCE AGE

All ages

REVIEWED

17 May 2026

PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

## IN SUMMARY

# What to Do If Your ADHD Medication Stops Working

## Is it the medication, or the situation around it?

- **Sleep is the most common culprit.** Six hours instead of seven for several weeks reproduces a lot of what looks like ADHD symptoms. The medication has not changed; the backdrop has. Two weeks of sleep diary tells you and the prescriber a lot.
- **Stress, demand and life events shift the load.** A new job, a difficult family stretch, financial pressure or a big increase in caring responsibilities all change the baseline. The dose that fit the previous load may feel insufficient against the new one.
- **Co-occurring conditions are often the explanation.** Anxiety, depression, perimenopause, premenstrual worsening, ongoing trauma symptoms or an undiagnosed sleep disorder. New or worsening co-occurring conditions are one of the most common reasons working medication feels less useful.
- **Hormonal change matters.** Oestrogen affects dopamine signalling. The premenstrual phase, perimenopause and menopause all shift how ADHD presents and how stimulants feel.
- **Substance use changes the picture.** Alcohol, cannabis, recreational stimulants and even shifts in caffeine all interact with prescribed medication. Honest reporting helps the prescriber more than carefully edited summaries.

## What to do, and what the options look like

- **True pharmacological tolerance is debated.** Short-term studies show some tolerance to acute effects. Long-term studies show most patients maintain therapeutic effect at the same dose over years. Tolerance is not the dominant clinical explanation for most patients.
- **A structured review is the first step.** Same depth as initial titration. Timeline, sleep, stress, co-occurring conditions, hormonal context, substance use, other medications, blood pressure and heart rate. The aim is to work out what has changed before adjusting the prescription.
- **If a change is needed, the options under NICE NG87 are clear.** Dose adjustment within the licensed range. A formulation change. A switch between the methylphenidate and amphetamine families. A move to a non-stimulant. Or addressing factors outside the medication entirely.
- **Bring specifics, not vague descriptions.** Loss of focus, loss of emotional regulation, loss of task initiation, loss of late-afternoon function: each points in a different direction. Specifics help the prescriber more than 'it just feels worse'.

## How we support the review

- **A proper review, not a quick adjustment.** NeuroFX treats 'the medication has stopped working' as a structured clinical question, not a request for a dose increase. We work through the picture and adjust the prescription where the picture supports it.
- **Coordination with co-occurring care.** Where sleep, mood, hormonal or anxiety issues are part of the picture, we coordinate with the relevant clinicians. ADHD medication is part of the plan, not the whole of it.
- **Sometimes the right answer is non-medication.** Addressing sleep, treating a co-occurring condition, structural changes at work, or non-pharmacological support can produce better outcomes than dose escalation. We say so when that is the case.

### WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP, your prescriber or NHS 111 if your ADHD medication is feeling significantly less effective, particularly if mood, sleep or daily function are deteriorating. Seek urgent help via 999 or A&E for any acute mental health crisis.

### SOURCES

NICE NG87; BNF; Cortese et al. 2018 (Lancet Psychiatry); Faraone et al. 2021 (Neurosci Biobehav Rev)

### NEXT STEPS

## Speak to NeuroFX

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.  
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