

ADHD MEDICATION · 4.7

Common Side Effects of ADHD Stimulants and How They Usually Settle

Most ADHD stimulant side effects are mild and settle within the first two weeks of a given dose. This summary covers what to expect, why it happens and the adjustments that help.

FOR

Adults and parents on or starting ADHD stimulants

AUDIENCE AGE

All ages

REVIEWED

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PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

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Why stimulants produce the side-effect profile they do

- **The medication does useful work in the brain.** Stimulants raise dopamine and noradrenaline activity in the circuits that handle attention and self-regulation. The same chemicals also signal in the heart, gut, salivary glands and arousal systems. The side-effect profile follows from that.
- **Most effects are mild and settle in two weeks.** The body adapts quickly. Effects that do not settle within ten to fourteen days are usually addressable through formulation, timing or dose adjustment with the prescriber.
- **Knowing the cause helps the response.** Most adjustments are practical: timing of dose, timing of meals, hydration, sleep hygiene, formulation choice. Stopping the medication is rarely the first answer.

The common effects, and what helps

- **Reduced appetite, particularly at lunchtime.** Eat a solid breakfast before the medication takes effect. Use the evening, when the dose is wearing off, to recover calories. Calorie-dense snacks (nuts, cheese, smoothies) help where weight loss is a concern.
- **Difficulty getting to sleep early on.** Take the dose as early as practical in the morning. Avoid late top-ups unless prescribed. Caffeine after midday is amplified by stimulants.
- **Headache, dry mouth, mild nausea.** Usually transient. Hydration helps headache and dry mouth. Severe, persistent, or new-pattern headache (visual symptoms, vomiting) is not a settling-in effect and warrants review.
- **Small rises in heart rate and blood pressure.** Common and usually well tolerated. Baseline and follow-up measurements are part of standard monitoring. Significant changes are a conversation with the prescriber, not a reason to stop on your own.
- **Rebound or mood flatness as the dose wears off.** Often softens with a longer-acting formulation. A different release profile or a small immediate-release top-up (where the prescriber agrees) can help.

When to escalate, and how we help

- **Some effects need same-day review.** Chest pain, fainting, severe mood deterioration, hallucinations, new severe tics, or signs of allergic reaction. Contact your prescriber the same day or use 999 / A&E for acute presentations.
- **Structured titration with monitoring.** NeuroFX provides specialist initiation under NICE NG87, with planned reviews, cardiovascular monitoring, and clear adjustments to dose, timing or brand where the side-effect picture calls for it.
- **Switching is a normal part of the pathway.** If side effects do not settle on adjustments, a switch to a different stimulant or to a non-stimulant produces a working option for most patients. A switch is not a failure.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP, your prescriber or NHS 111 if a new symptom worries you, if blood pressure or heart rate feels noticeably different, or if changes to mood, sleep or appetite are not settling. Seek urgent help via 999 or A&E for chest pain, shortness of breath, fainting or any acute mental health crisis.

SOURCES

NICE NG87; BNF; Cortese et al. 2018 (Lancet Psychiatry)

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.
CQC-registered. Bedford Consulting Rooms, 4 Goldington Road, Bedford MK40 3NF.

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