

ADHD MEDICATION · 4.1

Stimulant Medication for ADHD: How It Works and What to Expect

How stimulant ADHD medication works, the UK licensed options, what to expect during titration, the side effects that usually settle, and the safety monitoring that comes with prescribing.

FOR

Adults and parents considering ADHD medication

AUDIENCE AGE

All ages

REVIEWED

17 May 2026

PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

Stimulant Medication for ADHD: How It Works and What to Expect

What stimulant medication does

- **Helps the brain hold onto two key chemicals.** Stimulants increase the available amount of dopamine and noradrenaline in the parts of the brain that handle attention, working memory and self-regulation. They do not change the brain; they help the existing signals get through more reliably.
- **Two families of medication, both well evidenced.** The methylphenidate family (Concerta XL, Equasym XL, Medikinet XL and others) and the amphetamine family (lisdexamfetamine, sold as Elvanse in the UK, and dexamfetamine). Both are licensed from age 6. Most patients respond well to one or the other; switching is normal.
- **First-line under UK guidance.** NICE NG87 lists stimulants as the first-line pharmacological option for ADHD where medication is part of the plan. The short-term efficacy evidence is among the strongest in mental health.

What titration actually feels like

- **Three months is the usual shape.** Starting dose is almost never the final dose. Expect a low start, dose increases every week or two if benefit is incomplete and tolerability is good, and a formal review at around six weeks.
- **A first-week wobble is common.** Mild headache, reduced appetite at lunchtime, a flat mood as the dose wears off, slightly disrupted sleep. Most of this settles within ten to fourteen days.
- **Side effects usually have practical fixes.** Eating earlier in the day, taking the dose earlier in the morning, switching to a different release profile, hydrating. If something is not settling, that is information for the next review, not a reason to stop on your own.
- **If the first stimulant does not suit, the next one often does.** Around a third of patients find their first stimulant is not the right fit. A switch within the same family or to the other family produces a working option for most of them.
- **Heart rate and blood pressure are checked through titration.** Small rises are normal and usually settle. Cardiovascular safety in healthy patients is reassuring. Patients with existing heart disease or a strong family history of early sudden cardiac death warrant cardiology input first.

How we support you

- **Specialist initiation and structured titration.** Under NICE NG87, stimulants must be initiated by a clinician with training and experience in ADHD. NeuroFX provides that pathway with planned reviews across the first three months.
- **Shared care with your GP where the ICB accepts it.** Once you are stable on a specific medication and dose, we will support a shared care request to your NHS GP. Where the local ICB declines shared care, we offer continued private prescribing.
- **Medication is part of the plan, not the whole of it.** Psychoeducation, environmental adjustments and structured non-pharmacological support all sit alongside medication. We frame your treatment around the whole picture, not the prescription alone.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP, your prescriber or NHS 111 if a new symptom worries you, if your 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. NeuroFX can take you from assessment through prescribing where the NHS wait is not workable.

SOURCES

NICE NG87; BNF; Cortese et al. 2018 (Lancet Psychiatry); Faraone et al. 2021 (Neurosci Biobehav Rev); Zhang et al. 2022 (JAMA Netw Open)

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.

neurofx.co.uk · **info@neurofx.co.uk** · **0333 533 3303**