

# How Do We Know the Medication is Working?

Learn to recognize the signs that your treatment plan is (or is not) doing its job—and how to solve common medication problems. Plus, use our easy-to-use medication log to track your symptoms over time.

By Laurie Dupar, PMHNP

We know from years of research that ADHD medications work—in fact, studies show they work up to 80 percent of the time. Unfortunately, many children and adults taking ADHD medications for the first time find their prescriptions don't work the way they expected at first. Sometimes, the medication is the problem; other times, the expectations are the problem. Either way, it's good to know the signs of success and the signs of a bad fit.

## A. Good Signs

Below are some of the most common signs that a medication is doing what it should; you may experience others unique to your specific challenges. If you're not sure what to look for in yourself or your child, stick to these general guidelines. If you see them (even if some side effects remain), you're well on your way to optimizing your medication's effectiveness.

**Sustained focus:** If your medication is starting to work, you'll be able to focus for longer periods of time than you used to. This doesn't mean hyper-focus or "zombie focus"—just a nice, sustained focus that you can direct where you want it to go and that makes you more productive.

**Less impulsivity:** If your medication is working, you'll notice less impulsivity—both physical and verbal. You will interrupt people or jump out of your seat less often. You'll notice that your thoughts are less impulsive too—

### PERSONAL STORY

Read "Eureka! Meds Gave Me a Whole New Life" at <http://additu.de/new-life>

*from the editors of*

**ADDITUDE**  
Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

meaning you're less distracted by "brain chatter."

**Improved mood:** Once ADHD medication is optimized, people typically report an improved overall mood. They're less stressed, with less anxiety—usually resulting from higher productivity and fewer social challenges.

**Greater attention to detail:** You'll notice that details stick out more—instead of skipping a row in your spreadsheet or skipping a step in a math problem, you or your child will find that you catch small mistakes before they happen.

**Better memory:** Some patients report improved memory once they start taking ADHD medication. They can remember people's names more easily, or don't need to reread the chapter of the book they read last night.

**Better sleep:** Sleep problems are a common side effect of ADHD medication. But, in some cases, the right medication actually helps children and adults with ADHD fall asleep by slowing down their brains enough to quiet the racing thoughts that used to keep them awake.

## B. Bad Signs and Common Side Effects

What's the most obvious sign a medication isn't working? You aren't feeling any of the positive signs mentioned above. But even if you're feeling some or many of them, the medication might not be perfect. You might not feel the benefits as consistently or as strongly as you would like, or you might now be dealing with some uncomfortable side effects.

Many people know intuitively when they're experiencing unpleasant side effects, but some problems—particularly mood changes—may slip by unnoticed unless you're prepared. Ask your doctor to go over the most common side effects—like nausea, appetite loss, irritability, sleeplessness, or headaches—so you know what to look for. You should also ask your doctor to explain the rare side effects that can be extremely dangerous, like shortness of breath, allergic reactions, and heart problems. If you're a parent, ask the doctor what signs you should look out for in your child—especially if she isn't old enough to properly articulate what she's feeling.

## C. What Could Be Causing the Problem(s)?

Ineffective treatment usually comes down to one of these five explanations:

### a. Wrong Medication

ADHD medications come in three varieties: methylphenidates (Ritalin, Concerta, Daytrana, and others), amphetamines (Adderall, Vyvanse, Dexedrine,

### MEDICATION Q&A

Experts answer common questions about stimulants, dosing, and side effects at <http://additu.de/med-qa>

**How Do We Know the Medication is Working?**

*from the editors of*

**ADDITUDE**  
Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

and others), and non-stimulant medications (Strattera, Wellbutrin, Effexor, Tenex, Clonidine, and a few others).

If you're taking the wrong medication, you may feel some of the benefits discussed earlier in the chapter—but they'll be faint, and any negative side effects will outweigh them by a considerable degree. Are you more irritable than normal? Do you have a headache that won't go away? Are you sleeping worse than before? If you answer yes to any of these questions, it might be that you're using the wrong medication.

If you think you're taking the wrong medication, ask your doctor about switching. Make sure you try both types of stimulants (amphetamines and methylphenidates)—as well as a non-stimulant—before you give up on ADHD medication entirely.

## **b. Generic Vs. Brand Name**

Generics can differ from brand name medications by about 25 percent—in fact, it's perfectly legal for them to do so. But when you switch from a brand name to a generic medication, from generic to brand, or from generic to generic, you may find that the medication affects you in a vastly different way than it did before. A 25 percent change can be a lot!

If you switch medications due to insurance requirements but find that your previous medication was much more effective, talk to your doctor. In most cases, she should be able to work with your insurance company to get you back on your previously used medication.

## **c. Wrong Dose**

Some patients report that their medication feels like it's working—productivity, focus, and mood are all improved with minimal side effects—but it doesn't feel like enough. Maybe it wears off too early, or the gains are just not great enough to make a difference in your life.

If this sounds like you, you might be taking the wrong dose. In most cases, it's too little, since prescribers typically start at the lowest recommended dose and move up from there. But everyone responds to medication differently, and even a “low dose” might be too much for your particular brain and body. If you feel like your medication is helping, but could be doing more, talk to your doctor about adjusting your dose.

Staying on the same dose for too long can also be a de facto “wrong dose”—our brains change throughout our lives, and what worked for us when we

### **MEDICATION REVIEWS**

Read reviews of commonly used ADHD medications at <http://additu.de/reviews>

**How Do We Know the Medication is Working?**

*from the editors of*

**ADDITUDE**  
Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD



started ADHD medication won't necessarily work forever. This is particularly true for women, who cycle through dramatic hormonal changes as they age, which can greatly affect the effectiveness of their ADHD medication.

#### **d. Wrong Time**

You could also be taking your medication too early, too late, or at an incorrect frequency. Taking it too early means it wears off before you want it to, while taking it too late means it doesn't kick in by the time you need it.

If you're taking it at the wrong frequency—taking it only once a day, for instance, instead of in multiple doses—you may not be covered consistently. If different times of day have different focus needs, don't be afraid to ask your doctor about medication combinations: you could take a long-acting pill in the morning and a short-acting pill in the evening to keep your focus level throughout the entire day.

People with ADHD often struggle to remember to take their medication on time, or to refill their prescription at the end of the month. This can lead to gaps in coverage—gaps that can make your medication less effective.

To avoid these pitfalls, implement a medication reminder system and try out the Medication Log included later in this download.

#### **e. Interactions**

While most medications interact well with those used to treat ADHD, there are a few exceptions. Wellbutrin, for example, amplifies the effect of tricyclic antidepressants. So if you use a tricyclic to treat depression, your doctor shouldn't prescribe Wellbutrin for your ADHD (and vice versa). Other antidepressants called Monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs) are dangerous when combined with ADHD medication. Make sure your doctor knows what kind of antidepressant you're taking before you start taking a medication to treat ADHD.

Caffeine is another common culprit. It's also a stimulant, and many people with ADHD unknowingly "self-medicate" with caffeine everyday. Once you start taking an ADHD medication, you may find that the levels of caffeine you used to tolerate easily now make you jittery and anxious.

#### **EXPERT WEBINAR**

Is it ADHD or aging?  
Listen to an expert  
webinar on differentiating  
between hormonal  
changes and attention  
deficit at <http://additude/aging>

**How Do We  
Know the  
Medication is  
Working?**

*from the editors of*

**ADDITUDE**  
Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

## ADHD Medication Log

Fill out this simple log daily to track the effectiveness of your or your child's ADHD medication.

	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN
Medication name							
Dose/amount							
Time(s) taken							
Time medication wore off							
Hours of sleep? Nap?							
Rate the following on a scale of 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent)							
Mood							
Irritability/agitation							
Concentration/focus							
Memory							
Energy							
Ability to complete tasks							
Motivation							
Appetite							
What else?							
Nausea?							
Headache?							
Etc.?							
Other notes							

*Adapted from Laurie Dupar, PMHNP, Coaching for ADHD. Permission to copy for personal use only.*