

# Keeping ADHD Treatment on Track

What Parents Need to Know About Ongoing Care

## ADHD Is a Marathon, Not a Sprint

ADHD is a chronic condition, like asthma or diabetes, that needs ongoing management. The landmark MTA study found that carefully monitored medication produced far better outcomes than typical community care. But once that close monitoring ended, the advantages faded. Every follow-up visit protects the progress your child has made.

## How Can You Tell If Treatment Is Working?

"Working" has two levels. The first is **clear improvement**, meaning symptoms are noticeably better than before. The bigger goal is **getting into the normal range**, where ADHD symptoms are no longer causing real problems day to day. Don't settle for "better than before" if there is still room to improve.

### Important Concept

**Better behavior doesn't always mean better grades.** Medication can help your child sit still and pay attention, but that alone may not fix grades, friendships, or organization. If behavior has improved but school and social life haven't, your child may need skills-based support, not a higher dose.

## What Gets Checked at Each Visit

- **Symptoms:** using the same rating scale each time (like the Vanderbilt) so your child's doctor can track changes over time, not just go by impression.
- **Side effects:** appetite, sleep, mood changes, headaches, or seeming flat or less like themselves. Report these even if they seem minor.
- **Growth:** height and weight plotted on a growth chart at every visit. Stimulants can slow growth slightly, especially in the first year.
- **Heart rate and blood pressure:** checked at every visit and compared to age-appropriate norms.
- **Functioning:** how your child is actually doing in school, at home, with friends, and with emotions. This is the most commonly skipped check, and the most important one.

## When Parents and Teachers Disagree

It is normal for parents and teachers to rate symptoms differently. A child whose medication wears off by evening may look great to the teacher but struggle at home. If *either* person reports real problems, it deserves attention, even if the other person's ratings are fine.

## Keeping Your Child on Track

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- **Don't skip follow-up visits.** Only about 64% of patients keep filling prescriptions during the first year, and fewer than 25% take medication consistently at 12 months. Regular visits are the single best way to stay on track. If getting to appointments is hard, ask about phone or video visits.
- **Ask about an annual full review.** Once a year, your child's doctor should do a thorough reassessment: Is medication still needed? Are side effects adding up? Has functioning improved, or just symptoms?
- **Consider a planned medication break.** Your child's doctor may suggest a structured break to see if your child still needs the same treatment. This should be planned, not just stopping cold over summer.

## What to Do If Treatment Stops Working

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If things were going well and now they're not, it doesn't always mean the medication failed. Common reasons include:

- **Missed doses.** About 3 out of 4 kids are not taking their medication every day by the one-year mark. Before changing the prescription, make sure it's actually being taken.
- **A new problem on top of ADHD.** Anxiety, depression, or a learning disability can surface over time and make it look like the ADHD medication stopped working. Your child's doctor should screen for these.
- **The dose needs adjusting.** Children grow, and a dose that worked at age 7 may not be enough at age 10. Weight gain, puberty, and changing daily demands can all shift what's needed.
- **Expectations have changed.** Harder schoolwork, more social pressure, and longer school days may reveal gaps that were always there but didn't show up before.

### Call Your Child's Doctor If You Notice

Significant weight loss or not gaining weight as expected • New or worsening tics • Emotional flatness or loss of personality • Chest pain or fainting • Mood changes (persistent sadness, irritability, or thoughts of self-harm) • Symptoms returning despite consistent medication use

Source: VeriPsych Clinical ADHD Education Platform, Module 9: Monitoring & Long-Term Management. Based on AAP 2019 Guidelines, NICE NG87, CADDRA 4th Edition, and the MTA Study.