

Treating ADHD in Children and Teens: Choosing the Safest and Most Effective Drugs

What is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)?

ADHD is one of the most common behavior problems in school-aged children. It stands for “attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.”

The symptoms of ADHD vary. Children might be over-active—they may talk a lot, fidget, or run around when they should stay still. And they often have difficulty with activities where they need to pay attention, like homework and chores. They may have a hard time waiting their turn.

Teens with ADHD usually are not over-active (hyperactive). But, they may have trouble paying attention or controlling their behavior. They may struggle in school, jobs, and relationships, and they may have driving accidents.

How is ADHD diagnosed?

There is no blood test for ADHD. And it can be confused with other problems, such as depression, anxiety, learning disabilities, and bipolar disorder. The treatment for each is different, so it is important that your child is diagnosed correctly.

If you think your child or teen might have ADHD, go to a pediatrician or a therapist who has experience with ADHD. The doctor will observe your child and talk to you and your child’s teachers. It may take several visits to diagnose the problem. You might want to see a second doctor or therapist to get another opinion.

How is ADHD treated?

Prescription drugs usually help with ADHD symptoms, but drugs are not always needed. The drugs help reduce over-activity. They can help reduce behaviors that cause problems in classrooms, such as interrupting. They help improve attention and the ability to focus.



ADHD is not always easy to diagnose. Being overactive or not paying attention does not always mean a child has ADHD.

The most common drugs for ADHD are stimulants. There are several types and they all work about equally well. There are also some newer drugs that are not stimulants. They may not be as effective. For some children, behavioral therapy along with drugs works better than just taking drugs. The therapy helps children learn to manage their behavior better.

Are the drugs safe?

The stimulant and non-stimulant drugs are generally safe when they are taken as directed. Side effects are usually mild. They include loss of appetite, difficulty falling asleep, dizziness, headache, and stomachache.

Children and teens with heart problems should not take a stimulant drug or the non-stimulant drug, Strattera. Also, a child who takes Strattera should get regular check-ups for liver problems and depressed or suicidal feelings.

Our advice:

Some children and teens may need a prescription drug for ADHD. But first make sure your child is diagnosed with ADHD by a qualified doctor or therapist. And make sure your child’s symptoms are serious enough to need a drug.

 We compared the effectiveness, safety, and cost of the drugs for ADHD. We chose these two as *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs*:

- Generic methylphenidate tablets
- Generic methylphenidate sustained-release tablets or capsules

Methylphenidate has been used for many years. You might know it by its brand name, Ritalin. Studies show that it works and is safe for most children and teens. The generic form costs less than other ADHD drugs. It comes as a pill that is taken once a day. This is useful because it can be hard to get children and teens to take their pills regularly.

Drugs to Treat ADHD

Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs are in blue. We recommend these drugs because they are as effective and safe as the other drugs, and they cost less.

Our analysis is based on a scientific review by the Oregon Health and Science University-based Drug Effectiveness Review Project. This is a summary of a longer, more detailed report you can find at www.CRBESTBUYDrugs.org.

Generic Name	Brand Name	Pills per Day	Average Cost per Month
Stimulant Drugs Approved to Treat ADHD			
Amphetamine*			
Tablet	Generic	Two	\$84 – \$99
Tablet	Adderall	Two	\$285 – \$303
Continuous-delivery capsule	Generic	One	\$177 – \$184
Continuous-delivery capsule	Adderall RX	One	\$265 – \$291
Dextroamphetamine*			
Tablet	Generic	Two	\$24 – \$37
Sustained-release capsule	Generic	One	\$86 – \$115
Sustained-release capsule	Dexadrine	One	\$229 – \$272
Dexmethylphenidate*			
Tablet	Generic	Two	\$52 – \$80
Tablet	Focalin	Two	\$70 – \$110
Sustained-release capsule	Focalin XR	One	\$223 – \$234
Lisdexamfetamine*			
Capsule	Vyvanse	One	\$199 – \$202
Methylphenidate*			
 Tablet	Generic	Two	\$15 – \$38
Tablet	Methylin	Two	\$23 – \$43
Tablet	Ritalin	Two	\$66 – \$115
 Sustained- release tablet	Generic	One	\$32 – \$197
 Sustained-release capsule	Generic	One	\$144 – \$145
Sustained-release tablet	Concerta	One	\$207 – \$252
Sustained-release capsule	Ritalin LA	One	\$179 – \$194
Non-stimulant Drugs Approved to Treat ADHD			
Atomoxetine Capsule*	Strattera	One	\$218 – \$278
Clonidine Sustained-release tablet*	Kapvay	Two	\$167
Guanfacine Sustained-release tablet*	Intuniv	One	\$218 – \$227

***All of these drugs come in many strengths, and some are also available as liquids or patches.**

Prices are based on nationwide retail average prices for January 2012. *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs* obtained prices from data provided by Wolters Kluwer Pharma Solutions, which is not involved in our analysis or recommendations.

This series is produced by Consumer Reports and *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs*, a public information project supported by grants from the States Attorney General Consumer and Prescriber Education Grant Program which is funded by the multi-state settlement of consumer fraud claims regarding the marketing of the prescription drug Neurontin. This brief should not be viewed as a substitute for a consultation with a medical or health professional. It is provided to enhance communication with your doctor, not replace it.